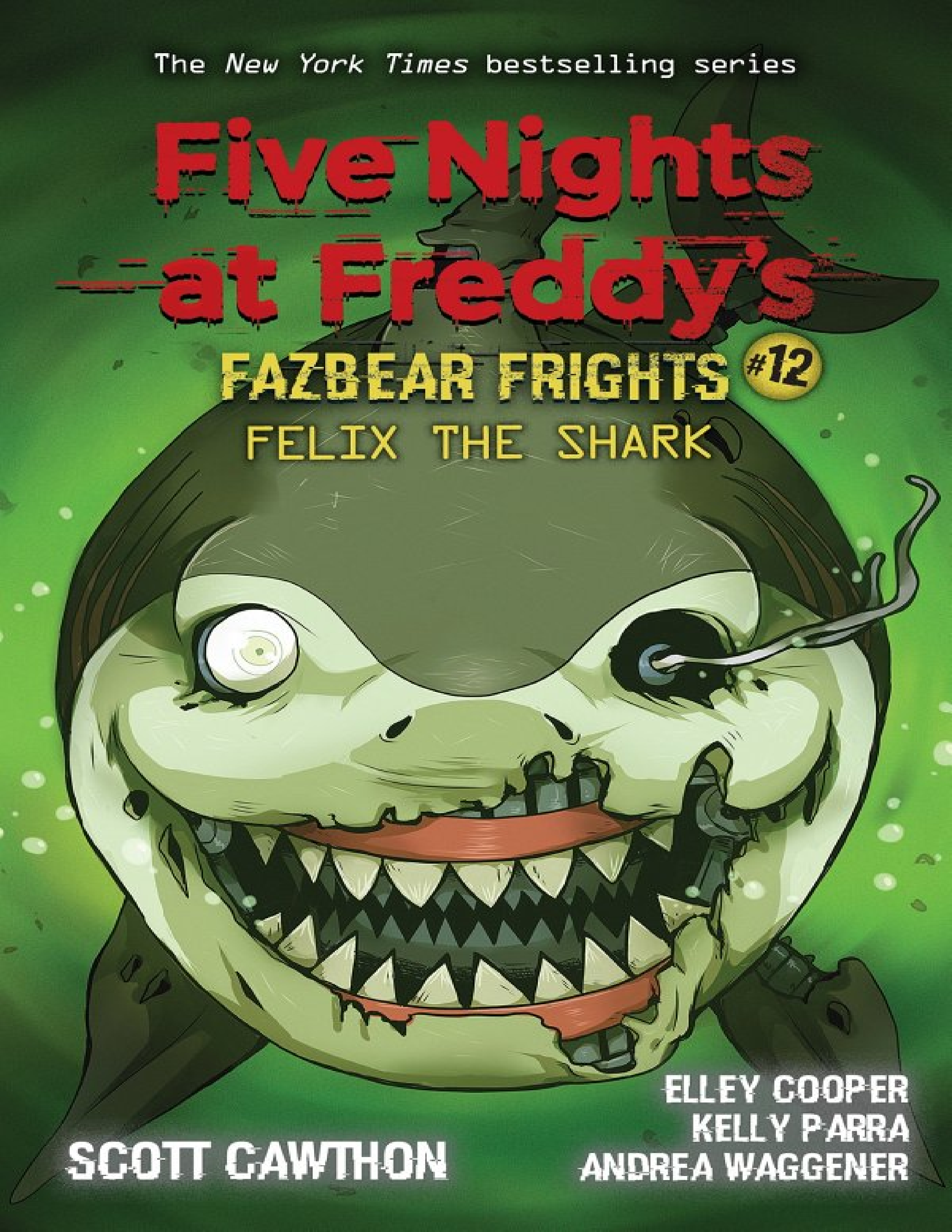

The New York Times bestselling series
Five Nights at Freddy's
FAZBEAR FRIGHTS #12
FELIX THE SHARK
ELLEY COOPER
KELLY PARRA
SCOTT CAWTHON
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Five Nights at Freddy's™

FAZBEAR FRIGHTS #12

FELIX THE SHARK

BY

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Scholastic Inc.

Contents


FELIX
THE
SHARK

Dirk knocked over Jenny's knight with his queen. "Check." He shifted positions; he was getting stiff from sitting so long.

Jenny sat on the other side of the low oak coffee table, her elbows propped on its surface, her square chin resting on her hands. She lifted a thick eyebrow and shrugged, then moved her own queen. "Check."

"How long are you two going to do that?" Jenny's twin, Gordon, asked. He was lounging against a pile of red pillows on the big black sectional sofa behind Dirk. "You two are stuck in a loop. Isn't there such a thing as a perpetual check?"

Dirk flicked a look at his friend. "We're not in perpetual check," he snapped.

"Actually, I think we are," Jenny said.

"We're not," Dirk said. "A perpetual check only happens when no one can deliver a checkmate. It's not something that's called after just a few checks."

"Yeah, well you're close enough," Gordon said. "Face it, the game's a draw."

Dirk shook his head several times.

For as long as he'd known Gordon, which was close to a decade now, Dirk had always found the guy's endless confrontations annoying. Maybe if Dirk had a wider circle of friends, he would have left Gordon behind long ago. But he didn't have that kind of choice.

Dirk was part of a group of five friends who spent most of their off hours in the twins' basement apartment. The twins and Dirk's other two friends, Leo and Wyatt, were basically Dirk's entire social life … and had been since junior high. They'd stuck together through high school and college, and now that they were supposedly adults, they were still together. Sometimes, Dirk had to admit that his small circle of friends and their evening rut was a little lame, but he couldn't seem to change coming over

here. He liked it; it was homey … and homey was something he'd never found elsewhere.

Dirk glared at Gordon now. "The rules of chess don't require a draw just because of a perpetual check. That only happens when there's a threefold repetition or if the fifty-move rule is met."

"Okay, but you could agree to draw," Gordon said.

Dirk frowned. "We could, but giving up is a sign of weakness."

Gordon snorted. "Some would argue *caring this much about a game* is a sign of weakness."

"Chess is the sport of kings!" Dirk shouted. He sat up straight and crossed his arms. "It's a game of mastery and intellect and creative thinking. In fact, I think children should be taught chess in school."

"Some are," Jenny said. "I just read about a special ed program where they're using chess to teach abstract reasoning and creative thinking. In fact, I'm putting together a proposal to take to the superintendent to see if he'll let me start a similar program. The kids I teach could use the focus."

"Good for you," Dirk said. As he often did, he lamented the fact that Jenny was just a friend. Back in high school, he'd tried to turn their friendship in to something more, but Jenny had gently told him she loved him like a brother and *only* like a brother. For the last seven years, he'd been telling himself she'd change her mind eventually. That was why he'd stayed here to go to the same college she went to, why he was writing for the local paper instead of becoming the travel writer he wanted to be.

Jenny caught Dirk staring at her, and she gave him a raised-eyebrow look. He flushed and shifted his gaze to Gordon, returning to his argument.

"Well, *all* kids should learn chess," Dirk said. "There's no debating it. The game is good for everyone."

"Everyone?" Gordon rolled his eyes. "Just because it's your opinion that chess is great doesn't mean everyone should have to do it."

"But I'm right," Dirk said. "And I'm going to keep playing." He looked at Jenny. "Okay, Jenny?"

Jenny yawned. "Whatever. Do what you have to do."

Dirk chewed on his lower lip and started to reach out toward the chessboard. Before he could put his hand on the king, a red pillow landed on the board, scattering the few pieces that remained on it.

Jenny didn't move when the pillow hit. She just calmly watched the chess pieces fly.

Dirk, however, clenched his fists, and whirled on Gordon, who was still on the sectional—one less pillow behind his head. "Dude! What'd you do that for?"

"You were in perpetual check. I ended it." Gordon ran a blocky hand through his curly auburn hair. He wore a tight gray T-shirt, which looked too small on his bulging, grease smeared biceps. Gordon was a mechanic, and he seemed to think being smeared with grease was cool. Dirk found the look desperate—it shouted, *I'm cool! Notice me!*

"We were *not* in perpetual check," Dirk ground out. He could feel the pulse throbbing at his temple. He hated things left unfinished. He liked things *done*, preferably triumphantly, but at least resolved. He couldn't stand unanswered questions. Now, this game would never be done … unless he could re-create the board. He began gathering up the pieces.

"Don't even think about putting those back," Gordon said quietly. "I'm tired of listening to you two check each other. Game's over."

"Who made you king of the hill?" Dirk demanded.

Gordon shrugged. "My house. My rules."

"*Our* house," Jenny said.

"You have a different opinion?" Gordon asked.

"I thought we were going to play Caverns and Crocodiles," Leo said before Jenny could answer her brother. He was sitting at the game table by the big stone fireplace at the end of the huge walk-out basement that Gordon and Jenny's parents had turned in to an apartment for the twins. Neither Gordon nor Jenny earned enough to have their own place. Dirk barely did … though the converted garage apartment he rented was hardly better than living on the street. That was why he was over here all the time, even though Gordon got on his nerves.

A fire crackled in the fireplace, and the room smelled faintly of wood smoke. Leo was bent over a notebook, a thick pencil gripped tightly in his left hand. Even from across the room, Dirk could hear the scratching sound of Leo's pencil moving across the paper. "I created a new character, and—"

The exterior door to the basement flew back and hit the wall with a *bang*. Wind whistled through the opening and tossed a dozen or so dry leaves on to the red-and-black linoleum that checkered the basement floor.

"The food hero cometh," Wyatt sang out, the usual big smile on his face. His brown eyes were bright with energy.

Dirk thought Wyatt might be the happiest guy he'd ever met, although he had little reason for it. Wyatt was a computer nerd who worked at an electronics store, explaining technology to idiots. Dirk would never have the patience for that kind of job.

"Actually, I think he *arriv*eth," Leo said without looking up from his notebook. He rubbed his right hand over the black bristles of his buzz cut, then cupped his equally bristly face. He did that a lot when he was thinking. "If he was cometh-*ing*, he wouldn't already be her*eth*."

Wyatt carried a stack of three pizzas in one hand. Two plastic grocery bags hung heavy from the other. Plastic soda bottles peeked out through one of the bag openings, chip bags through the other.

Dirk finished picking up the chess pieces the pillow had tossed around, but he didn't put them back on the board. With Wyatt here now, they would probably play Caverns and Crocodiles after they ate. No more chess for tonight.

That was okay. Honestly, Dirk had to admit he and Jenny were probably pretty close to a perpetual check. Gordon wasn't wrong when he'd said they were stuck in a loop. It would have been cool, though, to see if one of them had found a way out of it—lured the other in to a false sense of inevitability only to claim victory at the last moment. It could have been a good story for Dirk's next "Let's Play Chess" column for the paper. But maybe, if Leo really had created a new character for their game, Dirk could talk about that in his next "Fantasy Games Enthusiasts" column. The last time he'd written

that column, it had been about Caverns and Crocodiles, the tabletop role-playing game he and his friends had created based on an obscure novel called *The Dogged Dogmatist*, which Dirk had read and loved. The column had been surprisingly popular. Dirk had received dozens of emails and letters, asking all kinds of questions about the novel and how Dirk had come up with the twists and turns in his game. “I just have a knack for intuiting clues,” Dirk had told his fans.

Dirk didn’t get a response like that to his writing very often. It had been pretty cool to find out people actually read what he wrote.

The thing was that most of the time people tended to ignore Dirk, especially when he talked. He wasn’t sure why. Yeah, he knew he was kind of a dork—he was a little guy with big ears and hair that never would lay down right. He had a pronounced overbite that made him look a little like a chipmunk—a reality sadly worsened by the fact that his hair was chipmunk-colored. Not classic good looks, for sure. But even that couldn’t fully explain why people didn’t want to listen when he talked. He thought he had a perfectly fine voice, not squeaky or anything.

Wyatt stepped over to the game table and set the pizzas in the middle of it. He looked down at Leo’s notebook. “Writing a new masterpiece?”

Leo glanced at Wyatt. “New character for Caverns and Crocodiles.”

Dirk got up and offered a hand to Jenny. She didn’t need it; she was a gymnast—she coached at the high school where she taught—and she could probably have done a backflip to her feet. Dirk, however, would take any excuse to hold her hand, even for a second. Jenny accepted his help. Her palms felt rough with calluses when he pulled her up. She dropped his hand, and Dirk headed toward the bar counter.

The pizza smelled amazing: onion, green pepper, pepperoni … but he could also smell the ham and pineapple on the pizza Gordon and Jenny always got.

Dirk reached behind the bar counter to grab a stack of napkins and a couple of baskets. He handed the baskets to Wyatt, who dumped in the

chips. Dirk got the sodas out of the other grocery bag and grabbed a stack of plastic cups.

This well-choreographed food routine was done with no talking. They'd been through it often enough that they needed no discussion of who was doing what.

At the game table, Jenny was setting out paper and pencils for their game. Gordon was at the stereo setting up the night's music.

Leo was the only person without a task to fulfill. This was because no matter how many times you asked him to do something, he never got it in his head that he could do the same thing the next time.

Leo was an amazing storyteller—he wrote and illustrated comic books. He'd already had one published, and it was doing so well that his future seemed pretty well set. Honestly, Dirk was more than a little envious of Leo's success. It wasn't like Leo's life was great or anything—he was an awkward guy like Dirk, and he lived at home. Still, Dirk longed for the day he could write his own book instead of writing about other people's books.

There was something about all Dirk's friends that kept them out of mainstream society, kept them from going out on their own and actually having a life worth talking about. Jenny threw all her energy in to the kids she taught and coached, so she didn't have much time for anything else, even romance … although the romance thing was compounded by the fact that Jenny resembled her brother. On Gordon, squareness and toughness worked. He was short, but broad and muscular. He looked like a little commando. Jenny had pretty green eyes, but her muscular body mass and rough features made her unattractive to many guys. In high school, the kids had nicknamed her "Troll." Dirk thought that was mean, and he hated it on her behalf, but she didn't seem to care. Jenny kind of lived in her own world.

In high school, Gordon had been the star of the wrestling team, but even so, he hadn't been popular. Gordon had an obsession with conspiracy theories, so he was never destined to fit in. The first time the other jocks invited him to their table at lunch, he had droned on about how

extraterrestrials had infiltrated the government, that a race of people lived in the center of the Earth, and that a good portion of society had been replaced by androids. He'd never gotten another invitation to sit with them. These days Gordon spent his time working on cars or hanging out in his apartment … though he was still seeking a willing audience for his theories.

Wyatt was the most recent addition to Dirk's group of friends, "recent" being a relative term. Dirk met Wyatt their senior year in high school. By then, Dirk was living in a foster home. His parents had passed away in a car accident when he was eight, and then his aunt—who'd taken him in—died of cancer when he was in high school. Wyatt's family had moved in to the house next to Dirk's foster home. Wyatt was really smart and had skipped two grades already. The school wanted to advance him even further, but his parents didn't think he was ready socially … and they were right. When Wyatt tried college the following year, he hated it. He ended up dropping out and getting the job he had now. His parents were "very disappointed in him," a fact that in no way quelled Wyatt's daily delight.

Others might see these quirks as too unique to meld well together, but in truth, they were the only reason why Dirk even had a group of friends. Dirk wouldn't fit in with a group unless all its members had some quality that disqualified them from being "normal." Not only did Dirk's looks prevent him from wearing that label, his interests did as well. In addition to chess and fantasy games, Dirk was in to science—biology, chemistry, and physics; semiotics and puzzles; butterflies; sharks; and mysteries of all kinds. He was in clubs for those things, and in high school, he'd been on the debate team, too. His debate skills had no outlet now, except with his friends, and maybe in his newspaper columns.

Tonight, Dirk was going to need those skills. He was hoping to talk his friends in to helping him with a project, one he'd been thinking about for a while now. He'd been dreaming about it, too. For some reason, he felt compelled to—

"Earth to Dirk," Wyatt said.

“Huh?” Dirk looked around and noticed he was the only one not seated at the game table.

“Are you and your napkins being antisocial tonight or are you going to join us?” Gordon asked.

Dirk glanced down at the stack of napkins he still held. He laughed. “Sorry. I was thinking about a new club I want to start.”

Gordon groaned. “Another one? Isn’t there a limit on how many clubs a person can be in? You know, like you can only own so many animals? Like that?”

Dirk pulled out the last red-tweed-covered plush chair at the games table. He parceled out the napkins and accepted the slice of pizza Jenny offered him. “Thanks.”

“I don’t think the government regulates how many interests a person can have,” Wyatt said. He smiled at Dirk. “I think it’s cool you’re in to so many things. You’re like a Renaissance Millennial.”

“Doesn’t a Renaissance man, millennial or not, have to have talent or knowledge, not just interest?” Gordon asked.

A chorus of “Oooh” rose up from the table.

Jenny smacked her brother’s arm. “Don’t be mean.”

Dirk’s face got hot, and he looked down at his pizza so no one would notice. Unfortunately, when his face got hot, his ears did, too. He was pretty sure they were bright red.

Wyatt leaned over and nudged Dirk. “Don’t let him bother you. I don’t think someone who believes his boss is an android has a strong grasp on reality.”

“I heard that,” Gordon said.

Wyatt aimed his 300-watt smile at Gordon. “I figured you would. I was doing that thing … what’s it called?” He snapped his fingers. “Talking smack. I was talking smack to you.”

Gordon shook his head and took a bite of pizza. “Old Man Vance is definitely an android. You’ll see. Someday, one of his customers is going to

short out his circuits. He'll be all"—he froze his face in a contorted position —"and sparks will come out of his ears."

"You're so beyond weird there's no word for you," Jenny said to her brother.

"Thank you."

"Speaking of robots," Dirk said, thrilled to have an unexpected opening for what he wanted to talk about tonight. "Do any of you remember going to a Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria when you were little?"

"Freddy's!" Wyatt shouted. "Yeah, we went to one when we lived in Iowa. I loved Chica so much my mom made my fifth birthday cake in the shape of one of Chica's cupcakes." He beamed at the memory.

Leo, who had been scribbling in his notebook with one hand and eating chips with the other, looked up. "I'd forgotten all about Freddy's. But yeah, now I remember. I loved the Freddy's coloring books. That's what started my drawing. Eventually, I got tired of coloring and just drew the figures. My favorite was Foxy. He was kind of the inspiration for Scythe-man."

Dirk thought about the purple-clad superhero in Leo's comic. The character had a scythe attached to one arm. "Yeah, I can see that," Dirk said.

"I don't remember coloring books," Jenny said. "The Freddy's that Gordon and I went to didn't have any. But we loved the games, didn't we, Gordon? Remember the climbing bars?"

"How could I not?" Gordon said. "You'd swing straight up to the top like a monkey, and then Mom would yell at me for letting you go up there. Like I could have stopped you."

Jenny laughed. She took a swig of orange soda. "I loved the music, too, and the dancing. Gordon didn't care about that, but he was fascinated by the animatronics."

"Obviously," Wyatt said.

Everyone nodded.

Dirk watched Gordon's gaze drift toward the fireplace. His brows came together, and Gordon looked back at his friends. "I wonder if the android

takeover started at Freddy’s.”

Dirk groaned.

“No, seriously,” Gordon said. “The guy who started the Freddy’s chain was way ahead of his time with animatronics. Clearly, he had to keep things rudimentary for the public, but what if he had an underground laboratory? What if he created the first wave of the android army?”

No one had a comment about this, so Dirk jumped in. “I was thinking it would be fun to start a Freddy Fazbear club.”

“Yeah, because you’re not in enough clubs,” Jenny said. She winked at Dirk to let him know she wasn’t dissing him. He appreciated that.

“Well, we all have good memories of Freddy’s, right?” Dirk looked around the table.

Everyone nodded.

“I think I still have a plush Freddy in my closet,” Jenny admitted.

Dirk grinned. “That’s funny you mention it. I just came across my plush Felix, and that’s what got me thinking about Freddy’s so much. I even had a dream about him, and I tried to—”

“Who’s Felix?” Wyatt asked.

Dirk looked around the table at his friends. They all had blank expressions on their faces. Jenny reached out for another piece of pizza. Gordon picked up his root beer to take a drink.

“Felix,” Dirk repeated. “You know, Felix the Shark.”

Gordon guffawed and spewed root beer all over the game table. Leo yanked his notebook back a second too late.

“Hey,” Leo said. He quickly grabbed a napkin and wiped off his scribblings.

“What’s so funny?” Dirk asked. He could feel his face and his ears heating up again.

“Freddy’s didn’t have a shark,” Gordon said.

“Yes it did!” Dirk insisted.

Gordon looked at the others. “Anyone else remember a shark at Freddy’s?”

Leo and Jenny shook their heads.

"How old were you when you went to Freddy's?" Jenny asked Dirk.

He twisted his mouth in thought. "I think I was five … maybe?"

"Where were you?"

Dirk shook his head. "I don't remember. We were on the road a lot back then."

"What do you mean, 'on the road'?" Wyatt asked.

Dirk didn't want to talk about his childhood, so he picked up his cup and took a sip of cola. He also deflected the question. "None of you remember Felix the Shark and the moat he swam in?"

Leo stared at Dirk. He picked up his pen and started writing furiously.

"What are you doing?" Dirk asked.

"You just gave me an idea for a story," Leo said. "Great imagination, dude."

Dirk slammed his cup down on the table. Cola sloshed out. "It's *not* my imagination!" he shouted. "Felix was real!"

He looked at his friends. They all stared back at him with wide eyes and open mouths. Gordon tilted his head the way he often did when he was examining a suspected android. Great. Now Gordon was probably wondering if Dirk was an android, too.

Dirk took a deep breath and spoke in a quieter tone. "I don't mean *real* real. Felix was an animatronic, just like Freddy and Chica and Bonnie and Foxy. But he existed. I'm not making him up."

No one said anything.

"You really don't remember?" he asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

Dirk could feel his anger rising. Why were they acting so obtuse? How could anyone forget Felix?

He stood up so abruptly that he knocked his chair over. "You don't remember the moat thing? The entrance to Freddy's led to steps that went down under the moat thing and came back up on the other side. Remember?"

More head shaking.

"See, Felix was inside this moatlike thing. I mean, it wasn't really a moat. A moat's more of a trench than this was. This was like an encapsulated river. It had a current, but the current wasn't superfast. The tube encircled the entire restaurant. It was a tube made of the kind of glass they use for aquariums. You could see in to the water from anywhere in the restaurant. It was cool."

He checked his friends again. They were still staring blankly at him. He rushed on. "The water was totally enclosed. Felix never left the tube, but you could go in to the tube and swim with him."

Gordon barked out a single laugh. "You are so full of—"

"In an enclosed tube?" Wyatt asked. "Wouldn't you drown?"

"No, I don't mean *swim*," Dirk corrected. His voice was getting loud again. He could hear it, but he couldn't stop it. "I mean, like scuba dive. You'd put on swim trunks, and they'd hook you up to a breathing tube. There was this hatch that opened up, and you hopped in, and the attendant closed the hatch. Then you swam along the tube."

"You've got to be making this up, dude," Leo said. "Are you sure this wasn't some dream you had when you were little?"

Jenny nodded. "Yeah. It sounds like maybe a little-kid fantasy that you mistook for real life."

"I don't think he mistook anything," Gordon said. "I think he's totally making the whole thing up just to mess with us."

"I'm not making it up!" Dirk yelled.

Gordon raised his hands in a placating gesture. Everyone else just kept staring at Dirk.

Dirk frowned. "I might not have the details right about the tank, but I know I swam in it, and obviously, I didn't drown, so there had to be some kind of oxygen hookup. And I sure didn't imagine Felix. Felix would swim alongside you when you were in the tube."

"What did this supposed shark look like?" Gordon asked.

“Supposed?” Dirk ground his teeth. He could feel his shoulders rising up to his ears, and he forced them back down.

Gordon shrugged.

Dirk gave Gordon a scathing look and said, “Felix was kind of bluish-gray, about six feet long. He was a shark. You know what a shark looks like. He was animatronic. He opened his mouth. He looked around. He swam. Just like a real shark.”

“Wouldn’t a real shark eat you?” Leo asked.

“Sharks don’t eat humans!” Dirk said. “Sharks don’t even *like* the taste of humans.”

“Tell that to the surfers who’ve been attacked by sharks,” Gordon said.

Dirk shook his head. “When a shark attacks a human, it’s usually because it’s confused or curious. They basically take a test bite to see if we taste good, and unfortunately, that bite can be fatal or can at least remove parts people would rather keep. But really, humans are far more dangerous to sharks than they are to us. Think about it. Humans hunt sharks for everything from shark fin soup to lubricants to health supplements.”

“Well, we can always count on Dirk for useless trivia,” Gordon said.

Dirk ignored him. “Felix was a *programmed* shark and obviously, they didn’t program him to eat the kids who got in the tank with him.”

“That would be bad for business,” Jenny said.

Leo tried to contain a giggle by scribbling something down in his notebook.

“But did he have teeth like a shark?” Wyatt asked.

Dirk nodded. “Sure.”

Gordon shrugged. “Well, I can think of at least a dozen ways an animatronic like that could go wrong.”

Jenny nodded. “I agree.” She looked at Dirk. “You do realize how crazy dangerous what you’re describing would be? I can’t even imagine how they could safely build such a thing, especially back then. And for little kids? Even without the shark, the swimming tube would be a horrible idea for kids. We’re talking liability issues galore.”

Of course, you'd go there, Dirk thought. The twins' parents were both attorneys.

"I'm not making it up," Dirk insisted.

"I don't think you're trying to mess with us," Jenny said. She screwed up her face. "I just—"

"So, you're saying little kids, like five years old, like you were, wanted to get in this enclosed tank and swim with a big robotic shark?" Gordon asked.

"Yeah," Dirk said in a what-of-it tone.

Leo looked up from his notebook. "That would be scary as hell for a little kid."

"Never mind a little kid," Jenny mused. "I'd be terrified *now* being in an enclosed thing of water like that with a shark swimming with me. I wouldn't care if it was animatronic. And I know what you said, Dirk"—she smiled at him—"but sharks are just plain scary."

"Felix wasn't scary," Dirk objected. "You could see in his eyes that he was friendly. I mean, he was *programmed* to be friendly. I liked Felix. I have good memories of him." Dirk felt himself getting choked up, and he cleared his throat. "I thought of Felix as a kindred spirit. We were both outcasts, both misunderstood. Not wanted."

Dirk pressed his lips together and blinked so he wouldn't get teary. He lifted his gaze and looked at Jenny. She bunched up her eyebrows. "Maybe Felix was your childhood way of creating an ally when you didn't have one."

"I think Jenny has a point," Wyatt said. "It sounds like your subconscious made up this character to help you cope. It makes sense. Our minds do incredible things to get us through life."

"My subconscious mind did *not* come up with Felix!" Dirk shouted.

For several seconds, no one said a word. The music on the stereo continued to play some rock band wailing about love. The fire continued to dance in the fireplace. A log shifted, and it hit the bottom of the grate with a *thump* and several pops and cracks. Dirk could barely hear these sounds,

though, because blood was rushing through his head so quickly it sounded like a fast-paced version of Felix's swimming tube.

"So, none of you believe me?" Dirk asked. Because everything seemed muted, he spoke loudly.

He looked at each friend in turn, starting with Jenny. She frowned and looked away. Beside her, Gordon crossed his arms and shook his head. Dirk wanted to punch his friend in the nose. The guy who believed the creator of Freddy's invented an android army refused to believe Dirk's story? Yeah, that made sense.

Dirk looked at Wyatt. Wyatt's smile was still in place, but it looked a little wilted. He gave Dirk an apologetic shrug. "Maybe if you could remember where the Freddy's was. I mean, Fazbear Entertainment came up with some pretty cool things. It's possible one of their pizzerias had the moat thing you're describing. You really have no idea where it was?"

Dirk shook his head, and his shoulders slumped. Then he straightened them. "But that's one of the reasons I wanted to start this club. If you help me, I'm sure we could find all the old Freddy's locations, and we could track down where Felix was."

He waited for his friends to tell him what a great idea that was.

No one said anything for a couple seconds. Then Leo spoke up. "That sounds kind of like tilting at windmills or searching for Atlantis, dude."

"Yeah, it's just like that treasure hunt you wanted us to go on last year," Gordon said. "Would have been a lot of work for nothing."

Dirk looked at his other friends. "No one wants to help me find Felix?"

Jenny sighed. "No one wants to look for something that probably exists only in your imagination."

"You do have a *great* imagination," Leo said. "I can work Felix and the moat in to my latest story. I'd give credit to you, Dirk, obviously."

Dirk didn't respond, but Leo went on, "Maybe we can sit down together and you can tell me how you envisioned the moat thing."

"*I didn't envision anything!*" Dirk bellowed.

That was it. He was done.

Dirk went to stand up and realized he was already standing. He'd never sat back down. Good. That meant he could leave faster.

Dirk swiveled and strode away from the game table.

"Dude!" Gordon called. "Where're you going?"

"Maybe to find Felix. I don't know!" Dirk flung over his shoulder.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so outraged. He felt totally and completely *dismissed*. He hated that feeling!

Dirk charged across the basement, grabbed his coat from the bench by the door, and reached for the doorknob.

"But I wrote a new character for the game," Leo called out. "If you leave, we can't use it."

Dirk didn't even bother to answer. He just flung open the door, dashed through it, and slammed it behind him.

★ ★ ★

When Dirk got back to his pathetic garage-apartment, there was no warm glow in the windows. No one was ever waiting at home for him.

Dirk stepped out of his old, battered car. The driver's door squeaked when he closed it.

He wanted to slam the door, but when he slammed the door on his temperamental compact sedan, it tended to stick. He wasn't in the mood to crawl back in to his car from the passenger side tonight … because he was going back out as soon as he could pack a bag.

Unlocking the door, Dirk stepped in to his place. He called it an apartment, but that made the space sound fancier than it was. It was just a square room with a tiny bathroom stuck in the back corner. His "kitchen" was a sink, a small fridge, and "counter" made from an unfinished door, set on sawhorses. A hot plate on a tile on one end of the door's surface was his "stove."

Dirk's whole place still smelled like the eggs and bacon he'd made for breakfast that morning. The digital clock next to his sofa bed told Dirk it

was only 8:35 p.m. On Saturday evenings like this one, he was never usually here at this early hour. He was always at Gordon and Jenny's place.

Dirk hadn't had a home, a real home, well … ever. Sure, his aunt had tried to give him a home, but she wasn't cut out to raise a kid. She'd always been distant and formal with him. In the nine years he'd lived with her, he'd always felt like a guest; he lived in fear of breaking one of her knickknacks or staining her upholstery.

And before that, when his parents had still been alive? He'd never had a home then, either.

None of Dirk's friends knew about his past, and he wanted to keep it that way. It was too weird.

Dirk's mom and dad had put together a magic act before Dirk was born. They'd run away from home together right after high school graduation, and they'd supported themselves by doing magic shows all over the country. When they had Dirk, they weren't about to let a baby hold them back. They just included him in their show, and that's when they started making really good money. People flocked from all over to see the "Amazing Disappearing Baby" and later the "Amazing Disappearing Toddler."

All was going well until a social worker took exception to five-year-old Dirk being sawed in half. Child Protective Services got involved, and his parents took him out of the act. From that point on, they'd started leaving him with either his aunt or some babysitter while they did their thing. They'd probably still be on the road if it wasn't for a blown tire. Their car had gone over the side of a long drop-off, and this time, Dirk's parents were the ones who did the disappearing. Dirk had never forgiven his parents for going back on the road without him. If they hadn't, they wouldn't have died and left him alone. He'd never gotten over his belief that their magic act was more important to them than their son.

Dirk knew he'd let this belief pretty much run his life. He was self-aware enough to realize his past fueled his need to be right all the time. He also knew that spending his formative years in a magic act was responsible

for his obsession with puzzles, mysteries, and the unexplained. It was like he was a magnet for the bizarre. Maybe that was why he'd loved Felix so much. And now his need to be right, his interest in mysteries, and his love of Felix was sending him on another journey.

Dirk opened the rickety fake wood cabinet that served as his closet. Pulling out a canvas duffel bag, he crossed the green indoor-outdoor carpeting covering the garage's hard concrete floor. At a small desk on the opposite side of the room, he set down the duffel and opened the top drawer. He pulled out a ledger-type leather book. He put that in the bottom of the duffel bag and packed what he'd need for a couple weeks' travel. When he finished packing, he dug out the shoebox he kept his savings in.

A quick count of his money came up with just over a couple thousand dollars. It sounded like a lot, but gas and food and motel room costs could add up fast. He'd have to be careful.

A few moments later, he began gathering some other things—his sleeping bag, a jacket, a hat and gloves, a flashlight and batteries, and his phone. Once that was done, he stuffed in a grocery bag's worth of munchies like crackers, chips, nuts, and dried fruit.

Dirk looked at his packed duffel bag and the stack of supplies next to it. He glanced around his place one more time. His gaze landed on a framed photo of his parents, sitting on his desk. He stepped over and picked it up.

He snapped his fingers and opened the chest that sat under his only window. Lying on top of a pile of games and old toys, a matted and threadbare plush blue-gray shark with a limp dorsal fin lay on its side. Dirk picked it up and tucked it in his duffel.

He was ready. He would find the Freddy's that was home to Felix the Shark.

Dirk was hesitant to tell his friends for fear of opening up the wounds from his childhood, but he already had a few good guesses where Felix could be. He'd been using good old-fashioned research to retrace his parents' travels for months now, ever since he started having dreams about Felix.

Dirk wasn't sure why the dreams started. Was it because he was becoming more and more aware of how stuck he was in his life, how he was going nowhere? Had that made him want to go back to his origins for some reason?

Whatever had caused the dreams, at one point he'd gotten out the box that contained the few things his parents had left to him. Under his dad's goofy top hat, a small jewelry box filled with his mom's costume jewelry, and a couple of warped, yellowing photo albums, he'd found a ledger that kept track of their performances. That was the leather book he'd already put in his duffel. It was filled with lists of places and dates.

He was pretty sure he'd been five when he swam with Felix, but he might have been a year or two younger or maybe a year older. Not any older than that. He remembered the last two years of his time with his parents pretty well, and Felix wasn't one of those memories. So, he figured he had a three-year window to look in, and in those three years, his parents had performed in seventeen states.

He booted up his ancient computer and ran a search of the Better Business Bureau's record of Fazbear Entertainment. These resources gave him a list of every Fazbear Entertainment venue—restaurant locations and manufacturing and distributing locations—but they didn't reveal what attractions or animatronics were at those locations.

Dirk turned his attention to online forum posts by former employees of the company, to see if any could remember which franchise had an animatronic shark, but he only found a handful of posts, and none of them mentioned Felix. Thanks for nothing.

He really only had one option left—retrace his parents' steps. Thankfully, he had a way to do that.

This whole thing felt like the worst rejection of his life. Dirk was telling the truth, and he knew he remembered correctly what had happened. It infuriated him to be disbelieved.

He had to prove that he was right.

★ ★ ★

Using his mom's performance records combined with the research he'd done on Fazbear Entertainment, Dirk was able to confine his search area to a handful of towns. It was a matter of overlapping the bubbles. The towns that had a Fazbear franchise were in one bubble. His mom's performance dates were in another. Thankfully, only seven towns were in the overlap.

Today marked the eleventh day Dirk had been on the road, and he was heading in to his sixth town.

Because he had just two towns left to visit, Dirk was getting a little nervous about his overlapping bubble theory. It would only work if he had complete lists. If he didn't have all the Freddy's locations or his mom had left a stop off her list, he was screwed.

His spirits were a little low.

But that might not have had anything to do with his search. It might have had to do with the depressing places he was visiting. Take the town he was closing in on now, for instance.

Forkstop—which amazingly wasn't on the list of worst town names ever (Dirk had checked)—was once a booming community built around the manufacture and sale of farming equipment. Although it sat in the middle of the country, surrounded for endless miles by nothing but farmland and empty fields, it apparently used to have one claim to fame: It had been the birthplace of an infamous outlaw who had terrorized the Midwest in the late 1800s. The guy, Floyd Crawberry, had been no Billy the Kid, but he'd apparently done some heinous things. So, the town had tried to create a tourism industry based on him when demand for Forkstop's farming equipment dwindled. This had worked to an extent, but developers tried to go too far, too fast. Driving through, most of the Crawberry attractions were as defunct as the manufacturing plants.

However, knowing the history hadn't prepared him for how much despair radiated from Forkstop. He started feeling it before he even got to the city limits.

Forkstop was unlike the last few towns Dirk had driven through. Those had been surrounded by sprawling farms preparing for the fast-approaching winter, their rolling dry hills dotted with tidy small homes and barns of various sizes. Forkstop didn't have any farmland close to its boundaries, just empty buildings.

Dirk dutifully let up on the accelerator as he passed a low building with a caved-in roof and a REDUCE SPEED AHEAD sign by the road. He was a stickler for speed limits. The cost of fines for speeding wasn't in his budget.

As he slowed to the limit set on the next sign, he noticed that the dilapidated buildings had a sort of phalanx feel to them. Three rows of abandoned buildings flanked the road leading in to town, as if they were set up in formation to protect the town from invaders. As he passed the weathered, graffiti-covered structures, he half expected an army of android troops to start pouring out of them. He could picture the lurching, robotic soldiers descending on his poor little sedan, ripping off its doors, and pulling him out on to the pavement.

Dirk shivered. "Get a grip," he told himself. "You've been listening to too many of Gordon's stupid theories."

Maybe it's the weather, he thought. Today, in addition to heading in to a dying town, Dirk was feeling crushed by a gray sky that seemed so low, he could actually feel it pressing down on him. Or at least, he thought he could.

On top of the intrusive heavy gray above, a stiff wind was blowing. Leaves and twigs and trash blew across the roadway at regular intervals. The wind buffeted Dirk's little car, and the gusts' high-pitched whistle slithered in around the door seals, giving Dirk the willies. He couldn't wait to find a motel and get inside a nice quiet room, away from his car and the melancholy weather. In the last two towns, Dirk had slept in his car, just outside of town, because the motel rates had been too high. He wanted to sleep in a real bed tonight, and he needed a shower. He hoped a run-down town like this would have some old place with cheap rates.

Dirk reached Forkstop's city limits and passed by a faded WELCOME TO FORKSTOP, POPULATION 4,251 sign and began looking around. *Usually budget motels are right on the outskirts of these old towns*—

Dirk hit the brakes and took an abrupt right turn.

Tucked in behind what looked like an empty warehouse, a neon sign with a blinking arrow announced, otel cancy. Figuring that a hotel with a broken neon sign wasn't going to charge big bucks, Dirk aimed his sedan toward the sign and saw that the arrow pointed to a small roadside motel called CRAWBERRY CRADLE ROADSIDE INN. It had maybe a dozen units in a building that appeared to be in dire need of renovation. This was Dirk's kind of place.

★ ★ ★

A half hour later, Dirk—freshly showered and a little less morose—pushed open the dirty glass door at the Crawberry Café. "It's not really a café," the owner of his motel had told him. She was so old, she looked in danger of taking her last breath at any second. "It's a fifties-style diner. The owner has delusions of grandeur, but it's where all the young folk like you hang out. This time of day, there's usually a rush, but the food's worth the wait."

"Thanks!" Dirk said.

"You're very welcome, young man." The wrinkled, skeletal woman tapped her concave chest. "Name's Maude. You need anything, let me know."

"Thank you, Maude."

In the eleven days he'd been on his road trip, Dirk had discovered that local diners were his best source of information about old Freddy's locations. In the first town, he'd tried the county clerk's office first, but he'd gotten bogged down in administrative red tape. He'd stumbled on to what he'd needed to know when, dejected, he'd crossed the street to get a burger. Now he knew to go to the burger joints first.

The wind attempted to shove Dirk across Crawberry Café's lobby before the door fell shut behind him. He stumbled in to a SEAT YOURSELF sign. Its metal stand clattered at its base on the lime-green linoleum floor, but he managed to catch it before it fell. He heard a giggle, and he flushed, assuming it was directed at his klutziness. He didn't turn to check. He just headed for an open spot at the bright-red counter rimmed in shining chrome.

Even without looking around, Dirk got an instant feel for the place. The smells of grilling meat and onions, the clatter of plates, and the chatter of three dozen or so voices filled the diner's interior. A pop hit from two decades ago played on a gleaming jukebox squatting in the lobby. The diners he could see at the counter and those in the booths within his peripheral vision appeared to be about his age.

Padded, round, swiveling stools sat in front of the counter, and Dirk took a seat on an empty one, spinning himself inward to pick up a sticky laminated menu. Before he'd had more than ten seconds to look at it, a large woman in a tight lime-green server uniform slid a glass of ice water across the counter to him. "Whatcha want?" she sang in a cheerful voice.

Dirk smiled at her and noticed her name was Wendy. "Hi, Wendy," he said.

Wendy smiled back. When she smiled, she tucked in her double chin, turning it in to a triple chin. She was pretty in her bright-red lipstick and hooded brown eyes.

Dirk dropped his gaze and skimmed the menu quickly. He confirmed what he'd assumed would be there. "Double cheeseburger, mayo, no ketchup or mustard. Fries. Whatever cola you have."

"You got it!" Wendy gave him a thumbs-up—flashing a red-painted nail. Dirk felt ridiculously pleased with himself, as if he'd just ordered the perfect thing.

As soon as Wendy turned toward the kitchen ahead, Dirk reached to get napkins from the dispenser at the back of the counter. He pulled out four

and placed them neatly to the left of his narrow space.

"Moving here, or you a tourist?" someone asked in a nasally voice.

Dirk looked to his right. A frizzy-haired woman maybe a year or two younger than him sat on the next stool over. She pushed round-rimmed glasses up on to her little bulb-shaped nose.

"How do you know I don't live here already?" he asked. Dirk didn't think everyone would know everyone, even in a town this size.

The woman squished up her face. "Intuition. I just know things."

Dirk raised an eyebrow. *Is she some kind of kook?* Inwardly, he shrugged. *Who cares?* She was a local, and he needed to talk to a local.

"Well, you're right," he said. "I'm … well, I'm not sure what you'd call me. I'm not moving here, and I'm not a tourist like you probably mean."

"What do you think I mean?" the woman asked.

"Oh, leave him alone, Agnes," another woman said. This one leaned around Agnes and stared at Dirk with huge blue eyes. She had limp brown hair and a long face dominated by a toothy smile. "I'm Dawn." She stuck out a bony hand.

"Dirk," he said, shaking her hand.

"I don't shake hands," Agnes said.

"Oh, sorry."

"So, what are you doing here?" Agnes asked.

Wendy set a fizzy cola down in front of Dirk. Its bubbles sprayed above the glass's rim. A red paper straw bobbed above the rim as well.

"Well, actually, I'm kind of on a hunt. I'm looking for a Freddy Fazbear's Pizza."

"Oh, I remember those places. The pizzeria with the animatronics, right?" Dawn said.

Dirk turned his stool to look at her more directly. "Right. You had one here?"

"Sure. We used to go there when we were kids—remember, Agnes?"

Agnes picked up the milkshake that sat in front of her. She sucked noisily through the straw. "Yeah. I didn't like that place. It was creepy."

Dawn laughed at her friend. “Remember Bonnie? He was my favorite.”

“I thought he was a she,” Agnes said. “Bonnie’s not a boy’s name.”

Dawn sighed. “Well, Bonnie was a boy rabbit.”

Before Agnes could respond to that, Wendy reappeared and put Dirk’s plate in front of him. She placed similar plates in front of Agnes and Dawn. She stuck a check under each plate.

“Thanks,” Dirk said.

For the next few minutes, the only talk was focused on passing salt, ketchup, and extra napkins. Dirk nearly inhaled most of his burger in just a few bites. It was the best one he’d had yet on this trip. The meat was seared just right, perfectly juicy. The cheese was extra sharp, and the pickles were tangy. For a few minutes, he forgot his quest and just chowed down, but then he remembered why he was here. He turned toward the woman at the counter next to him. “So do either of you remember where Freddy’s was?”

“That place shut down forever ago,” Dawn said. “I don’t even remember what part of town it was in. Maybe out on the west edge? No. That was the other pizza place.” She shrugged.

Agnes frowned. “I think Freddy’s was on the north end of town. Remember, Dawn? You had to go by that biker’s tavern to get to it. The bikers always made me nervous.”

“You might be right,” Dawn said. “But if it was out there, it’s not there now.”

Agnes nodded. “I don’t think there’s a building in this town that could have been a Freddy’s. I’ve been to a couple Freddy’s pizzerias in other places, and they had a certain look about them. I can’t think of an abandoned building here that looks like that. Maybe it got torn down?”

Dirk’s stomach flipped over, but he figured before he got upset, he’d determine whether the Freddy’s in this town was even the one he was looking for.

Dirk wiped his mouth and took a big swallow of cola to wash down the food he’d just shoveled in. “I have a question about your Freddy’s.”

Both Agnes and Dawn looked at him. He thought he saw Dawn wink at him. Was she flirting? He didn't know. He'd never been flirted with.

He cleared his throat. "Do either of you remember an animatronic shark? It was—"

"Felix," Agnes breathed. She hugged herself. "You're talking about Felix."

"Yes!" Dirk shouted, triumphant.

For an instant, the buzz of chatter in the diner died down to practically nothing. Dirk felt his face blaze red. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"What're you looking at?" Agnes snapped at a blonde woman staring from a nearby booth.

The woman rolled her eyes and looked away.

"I'm sorry," Dirk said to Agnes and Dawn. "I got excited. See, I've been looking for Felix, I mean, the Freddy's that had Felix, and—"

"Why?" Agnes gasped. "Why would you want to find that monster? It was horrible!" She looked at Dawn. "Remember him? That terrifying shark thing in the tube?"

Dawn gave an elaborate shudder. "I do remember it now that you mention it. Wow. I'd blocked that out. But yeah, I got in that tube when I was little. Maybe five or six years old? I had nightmares about it for weeks after that." She turned to Agnes. "We swam together that day."

Agnes took a long noisy suck from her straw. Then she punched Dirk in the upper arm. "Thanks a lot, jerk!"

Dirk rubbed his arm and stared at her. *What is wrong with this crazy woman?*

Agnes rubbed her nose, which had turned red, and she reached under her glasses to wipe her eyes. "I never told you," she said to Dawn, "but Mom actually took me to a therapist a few times because of that horrible shark. I wasn't just having nightmares. I got, like, sick, every time I thought about it." She glared at Dirk. "It's been years since I thought about all that. And you had to go and bring it up."

Dirk couldn't figure out what was going on. Was there more than one shark at Freddy's? Felix wasn't horrible. He said so out loud. "I liked Felix," he said. "I didn't think he was scary. He was kind of sad actually, like he wished he could be out in the restaurant with the others instead of in a tube by himself. He loved having kids swim with him. He was friendly."

"He was an animatronic, dude," Dawn said. "He didn't wish anything. And I never thought he seemed sad … or friendly. He was actually kind of hungry-looking." She gave Agnes a half smile. "I totally get why he freaked you out. When that thing swam toward you, it was pretty scary."

Agnes pushed her plate away, her burger half-eaten. "I had nightmares for a long time. Not just about Felix, but about the tank, too. I used to dream about getting trapped in that tank with him. I remember going around and around and around, trying to scream, but not able to because of the mask. Then I'd wake up, choking."

Dirk frowned at Agnes. "Are you sure we're talking about the same place? The Felix I remember was in an enclosed tube that circled the whole restaurant. Maybe there was a different Felix at another Freddy's."

"In a town this size? Two Freddy's?" Dawn said. "No. We just had the one, and yeah, Felix was in an enclosed tube that went around the whole place. I'm not sure why, but I think your memory of that shark is a little skewed. If you thought he was friendly, you're imagining things."

"I'm not imagining things!" Dirk yelled.

Once again, the restaurant went quiet. This time, someone hollered back, "Take a chill pill, dude!"

Dirk clenched his fists, and he noticed both Agnes and Dawn were leaning away from him.

Fine.

He couldn't believe what was happening here. He'd been so elated when Dawn had said she remembered Felix. He'd done it! All his research and his travel had gotten him to where he needed to be!

But now it was all going wrong. Why didn't they remember the Felix he remembered?

Dirk stood and grabbed his check. “I think you’re both delusional. Felix wasn’t a monster, and I’m going to find him.”

Dirk stomped away from the table, ignoring the looks that were thrown his way. He hurried to the cash register and barely looked up when Wendy stepped up to take his money.

“I couldn’t help but overhear.” Wendy kept her hand on his when he handed her a twenty.

Dirk lifted his head and met her gaze.

“About Freddy’s,” Wendy said. “I know something that might help you.”

Up close, Wendy gave off an odd scent of grease and lavender. Dirk noticed she’d smudged her lipstick.

She removed her hand and began making change. “Freddy’s was condemned after a kid almost drowned in that tube you were talking about. I remember reading about it in the paper. My husband was a contractor, and he worked on the building after Freddy’s closed down. He claimed that the owner of Freddy’s had made a secret deal with a land developer. He sold the land on the condition that the developer’s project be built to keep Freddy’s intact. It must still be there.”

“Really? Where?” The words came out in a high-pitched squeak. Dirk was so excited he was practically bouncing.

Wendy grinned at him. “The place matters that much to you, huh?”

Dirk flushed. “Well, It’s one of my best childhood memories.”

Wendy nodded, then leaned over the counter and lowered her voice. “Well, I’m sorry … I remember it was out on the west side, like the girls said, but I don’t know what was built around it. The town didn’t need the bad press, so it was all hush-hush. Forkstop was going crazy then. We had all kinds of things going up … the big mall on the other side of town, the resort, the theater, a bunch of restaurants, the water park. All closed down now.”

“So your husband wouldn’t—”

“Know anything?” Wendy finished for Dirk. She shook her head. “I’m sorry. No. He passed several months ago.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry.”

“Thank you.” Wendy’s eyes glazed a bit, but she continued. “I wish I could tell you more. Felix became a sort of local legend around here after Freddy’s closed. When the former owner died, there were tons of rumors going around, no way to tell what’s true anymore.”

“Rumors … like what?”

“Oh, crazy stuff. Like that the owner had kept Felix functioning, even after Freddy’s was closed. That he had some secret project related to that shark. Kids used to go hunting for him, saying the owner had a way of sneaking back in to Freddy’s to see Felix.”

Dirk opened his mouth to ask a question, but a man shouted, “Wendy! Order up!”

She gave Dirk an apologetic look. “That’s all I know. Sorry.” She handed him his change. He gave half of it back to her, then left the diner in a daze.

★ ★ ★

The next morning, Dirk returned to the Crawberry Cradle Roadside Inn’s tiny rose-wallpaper-covered office. “You like the wallpaper?” Maude asked when she noticed him staring at it.

Maude’s gray hair had been in a bun the day before, but today it was in a long braid that hung down the back of her green plaid flannel shirt.

“No,” Dirk said, still in a fog. “Sorry, I mean—”

Maude cackled. “You’re a funny young man. Same wallpaper was in Floyd Crawberry’s momma’s drawing room. I had this made special.”

“Well, it’s really, um, *red*,” Dirk said.

Maude let loose another cackle. “It is that.”

“Um, I need to stay another night,” Dirk said. He glanced at his watch. He wanted to pay quickly and then get on the road. He planned to drive the

forty-five miles to the county seat and visit the clerk's office. Unless …

"You don't happen to know where the old Freddy Fazbear's Pizza was, do you? With the animatronics?"

Maude took his money and paused before opening the register.

Dirk had spent the previous evening talking to people around the town, trying to figure out what had been built over Freddy's. He'd gotten about two dozen different potential locations from this bit of sleuthing.

"Join me for some peppermint tea, youngster," Maude said. "And I'll have a think about that."

Dirk groaned inwardly, but he agreed. If Maude did remember, at least it would save him the cost of gas from driving to the county clerk's office.

Maude got him settled at a rickety oak table in a tiny kitchen behind the hotel office. She set a fragile-looking cup and saucer in front of him—which he was terrified he'd break—and then set down another plate before him. This one held a large blueberry muffin. Okay, maybe tea wasn't such a bad idea after all.

The muffin was good, and Maude was entertaining. "Used to be a different kind of inn right about where we are now—the restaurant kind." Maude handed him a second muffin. "Woman who ran it was the best cook in the state. As the story goes, some feller who'd planned to go farther west to set up a homestead got one taste of her chicken-fried steak and said to his wife, 'The fork stops here.' He bought a bunch of land, started a farm, and founded a town."

"Are you making that up?" Dirk asked.

Maude blasted him with her laugh. "God's honest truth, young man!"

Dirk decided to nudge her back toward Freddy's. Over the next half hour, he and Maude went through the twenty-four potential Freddy's locations from his list. She managed to whittle the list down to nine. She didn't know where Freddy's had been, but she knew for sure where it *hadn't* been.

This meant Dirk still had to go to the county seat, which he did. He spent several hours in the clerk's office—they needed someone to come in

and reorganize their records—but at least the time he was there was worth it. Triumphant, Dirk left the county seat with an address for the defunct Freddy's *and* for what was at that location now: the water park Wendy had mentioned.

Dirk had read about the water park the night before. It was the biggest Crawberry-themed venture to spring up when the town had decided to use its villain as a tourist attraction. And it was also the most successful … for a very short time. Now the Crawberry Flows Water Park was, according to an angry letter-to-the-editor writer, a "dried-up eyesore."

Even though it was getting late in the day when Dirk returned to Forkstop, he used a map he'd bought from a crusty old gas station to guide his way to the attraction. Buoyed by anticipation, Dirk was practically dancing in his seat as he drove past boarded-up stores, padlocked warehouses, and vacant lots. The scenery wasn't anything to get excited about, but Dirk was on a high. He was about to find it. He was going to bring back evidence to shove in his friends' pitying, patronizing faces.

Dirk pulled his car over to a cracked curb and frowned at the sprawl of concrete slides and plastic tubes winding around the property. A couple dozen small buildings loomed over a tall chain-link fence. If ever a place looked like a serial killer hangout, or where zombies would shuffle en masse, or where Gordon's stupid android apocalypse would begin … it was the Crawberry Flows Water Park.

Its entrance was guarded by a huge stone archway, designed to look like two gravestones connected by a sculpted shovel, hoe, and pitchfork—apparently three of Floyd's murderous weapons of choice. For all the girls at the diner bashed Felix for being scary, this water park didn't look like anything a child might want to visit. From what Dirk had read, though, the place had been quite popular with kids. Maybe the gravestones and murder weapons looked less threatening in their heyday, under bright blue-sky summers … before they'd been covered with green mold, black mildew, and various colors of angry graffiti.

The same mold, mildew, and graffiti appeared to cover all the park's buildings as well as the tubes and slides curling idly through the park. Overgrown by scraggly bushes, all the expanses and contraptions that used to hold water now held only dirt, dried leaves, and trash.

The park gave off an odor of decay that was so sickly sweet it made Dirk's nose twitch. Not far from the entrance, something metallic made a rhythmic *screech-and-tap*, maybe a rusted sign swinging in the breeze. Beneath that sound, Dirk could hear a scratchy scrabbling. He envisioned rats scurrying through the empty tube slides.

Dirk really didn't want to go in to the abandoned water park. He *really* didn't. And he wasn't even sure he could get in. The chain-link fence was topped with barbed wire.

But he'd come this far. If what Wendy had told him was right, Freddy's was hidden somewhere in this water park. And Felix was still there. Dirk had to try to find him.

Sighing, Dirk opened his car door and looked around to see if anyone was watching him. He saw no one, so he closed his car door and walked toward the water park's entrance. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he did. A few drops of rain spotted the dust-covered sidewalk in front of him. One hit his nose.

He looked up at the gray sky, nearly identical to the one that had hung low over the town the previous day. *Nearly* identical. This one was a little darker, a little more threatening.

Dirk quickened his pace.

From his research, Dirk had learned that the water park sat on fifteen acres. The land was pretty much square-shaped. That meant each side of its perimeter was a little over 250 yards long—about the length of two-and-a-half football fields.

Dirk glanced up at the sky again. Not only were the clouds threatening, but what little sunlight that shined through them was clearly sinking toward the horizon. Evening was coming. He didn't relish the idea of exploring the place after dark.

Dirk set out at a jog and began circling the outside of the park, running alongside the chain-link fence. As he ran, he divided his gaze between his feet—not wanting to stumble over anything—and the fence. He was searching for a way through or under it. He figured there had to be some way in. How else did all that graffiti show up on the tubes and slides and buildings?

And his suspicions proved right—he found his way in along the back fence. Water runoff had created a depression in the earth under one section, and there was a trough deep enough for someone Dirk's size to slither through. When he spotted it, he didn't hesitate. He immediately dropped to his belly and crawled under the fence.

As soon as Dirk stood up inside the park, thunder rumbled. The air now smelled like ozone, and the few drops he'd felt began turning in to a steady rain.

Great.

Dirk had come prepared, sort of, for this excursion. His preparation consisted of his flashlight and an old map of the water park he'd found along with the map of the town. Dirk scanned his surroundings to find a place to shelter while he decided where to start.

He spotted a covered picnic area and jogged over to it, ducking under its crumbling roof. The rain pattered just outside the overhang as he grabbed his flashlight and the map.

The Crawberry Flows Water Park had three twisting, enclosed-tube slides, one tall straight open slide, two meandering channels that had been rivers with various levels of "rapids," a couple of pools—the smaller one was Floyd's Pond, and the larger one was Floyd's Swimming Hole—and one "beach," a big-wave pool painted to look like the ocean and sand. It also had multiple eating and gathering areas, some covered, some not. The one Dirk was using for protection from the rain was called Floyd's Fury.

Obviously, Freddy's wasn't disguised by any of the water features or the eating areas. It also wasn't in the hut-like buildings that had housed snack shops, little gift shops, and restrooms. It couldn't have been in the pump

house, which was the size of a single-car garage, and it couldn't have been in either of the two maintenance buildings, which were each about the size of a triple-car garage. Freddy's would have been too big to be camouflaged by these smaller components of the park. But four of the park's buildings were possible candidates. These included a guest services building, one large building that housed the park's group of indoor slides, and two restaurants—a grill and a café.

Dirk thought this relatively small selection of possibilities made his quest doable. And so, map in hand, he pulled his jacket up over his head to keep at least some of the rain off, and set off to explore with the assumption he'd be successful in a relatively short amount of time.

★ ★ ★

Dirk's assumption was incorrect, horribly so. Three hours after he'd entered the park, he returned to his room, defeated and dejected … and cold.

Not sure what else to do, he took a long, hot shower. In the shower, he assessed his situation, which was, at the moment, bleak.

Dirk had scoured every inch of the water park. At first, he'd been full of energy, and he'd been thrilled when he'd easily been able to break in to the first building that might have hidden Freddy's—the guest services building. His spirits had dipped a little when he didn't find Freddy's in that building, but he was still hopeful. He remained hopeful as he managed to get in to both restaurants. When those proved to be lost causes, he moved on, a little less hopeful, to the building that had the indoor slides. That building was harder to enter. He'd actually had to break glass to get in, something he felt bad about, but he'd come too far not to do it.

However, his one bad deed had been a wasted one. As soon as Dirk was in the building, it was clear it didn't hold Freddy's. Aside from disturbing shadows and dripping and tapping sounds that made all the hairs on Dirk's body stand up, the building held nothing but a tangle of snakelike plastic tubes. The murky exterior of the slides pushed Dirk's overactive

imagination just a little too far … he'd come up with dozens of ideas about what might've been hiding in those tubes. Unfortunately, Freddy's wasn't one of those ideas.

Losing hope, Dirk had made his way back toward the dip under the fence. By then, he was soaked through, but he still shined his light this way and that in case he'd missed something. The only thing he'd noticed on his return trip was the heavy-duty dead-bolt locks on all the small buildings. For some reason, they were all more secure than the large buildings he'd gotten into. But it didn't matter. What he wanted wasn't in those buildings anyway.

After his shower, Dirk fell in to bed. He was asleep in seconds, but his sleep was restless. All night, he was in a dream in which Felix stared at him through a glass wall and begged Dirk to find him and keep him company.

When he'd gotten up to pee during the night, his inner vision taken up by Felix's longing gaze, Dirk realized he had one more avenue to pursue. When he'd been at the clerk's office, he'd gotten the name of the person who'd owned the Freddy's in Forkstop. Yes, the owner was dead, but perhaps the owner's heirs would know if Freddy's was somewhere inside the water park, and if they did, maybe they'd have a way to access the building. Or maybe they could point Dirk to someone who could.

A reasonable person probably would have concluded by now that Felix and his swimming tube were a lost cause, but luckily Dirk wasn't reasonable. And he wasn't ready to stop his search.

When Dirk got up in the morning, he returned to Maude's office and told her that he needed to stay another night.

"You got it, young man!" Maude turned to her computer and began tapping slowly at the keyboard.

Staring at her bony, age-spotted hands, it occurred to Dirk that Maude had the most knowledge of anyone he'd met in town. She might be able to help him track down the heirs he was after.

"Did you know an Aaron Sanders?" Dirk asked.

Maude made a little *tsk* sound as she hit the wrong key on her keyboard.

Dirk winced. “Sorry.”

Maude shook her head. “No matter. I can fix it.” She turned and cocked her head. “Aaron Sanders, you say? Now there’s a name I haven’t thought of in years.” She sank down on to the stool behind the counter.

“You knew him?” Dirk heard the excited squeak in his voice, but he didn’t care.

“Sure enough,” Maude said. “I knew him when we were kids. He was kind of a strange boy, always playing pranks, making up stories, and making puzzles or mazes. He once spent the whole summer digging deep trenches on his parents’ property, creating mazes.” Maude shook her head. “I didn’t know Aaron as an adult. No one really did, after the tragedy.”

“What tragedy?”

Maude sighed. “It was so sad.” She took a deep breath and blew it out. Her breath smelled like mouthwash. “It all started so well for Aaron … that’s what makes it so sad. The promise he had, you know?”

Dirk didn’t respond because he *didn’t* know. He just waited.

“Aaron married this lovely girl right out of high school. Then he just started to take the world by its tail. Studied restaurant management. Had his own little hole-in-the-wall sandwich place by the time he was twenty. Also had a son by then, too, sweet little baby boy. Lonnie.”

Maude stopped talking and looked beyond Dirk’s shoulder.

Dirk waited some more.

Maude blinked and shook herself. “Right about the time Aaron was looking in to getting the Freddy’s franchise, he took his wife and children to the coast for a vacation … by then he had a daughter, too. Now, I only know this story from newspaper articles and town gossip, so take it with a grain of salt. But if the story’s true, Lonnie was chasing a butterfly near the edge of the surf, and before Aaron or his wife could stop him, Lonnie chased the butterfly right in to the water. Got caught in the surf and drowned.”

“That’s terrible,” Dirk said.

Maude nodded. “Sure enough, it is. But then it gets strange. According to Aaron, Lonnie’s body would have been pulled out to sea, possibly never

found, but a shark swam close to shore and bumped the body back in to shallow waters, where Aaron was able to recover it."

Dirk's eyes widened. "Wow."

"Yeah, most people don't believe that part of the story, but I tend to. It sure would explain his antics with the pizzeria."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, the controversy about him wanting to have an animatronic shark at Freddy's."

Dirk leaned forward. "Felix!" he said.

Maude raised an eyebrow at him. "That's right. Felix, the shark. The other Freddy's pizzerias didn't have a shark, so people said Felix would make Aaron's Freddy's inauthentic. He didn't care. He came back from that vacation as a totally different person. His wife, too. Which was understandable, of course. She just shut down, withdrew from the world. Aaron, though, he pushed even harder in his businesses. But he was obsessed. Obsessed with sharks and butterflies." She shook her head. "He was an odd duck. But then, he had good reason to be."

Dirk nodded.

Maude rubbed her eyes and returned her attention to the computer keyboard.

Dirk cleared his throat. "Do you know who inherited his estate? Is his wife still alive?"

Maude raised her head and shook it. "No, she died not long after Lonnie did. Only Louisa is left. Aaron's daughter." Maude adjusted the old-fashioned combs that held back her gray hair today.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Well, that's an even sadder story there."

Dirk sighed. Now what? "What happened to her?" he asked.

"Oh, poor Louisa. She's a ward of the state now … spends her days locked in her mind. She's completely gone from this world."

"*Completely?* She wouldn't remember what happened to Freddy's?"

Maude shook her head. “Louisa’s last lucid thoughts went in to that book she wrote.”

“What book?”

Maude looked up at the ceiling. “What was the title? It was sort of a cult hit a few years back. Louisa wrote it right after her father died, dedicated it to him. Folks say she actually wrote it because he asked her to. And for some reason no one can explain, right after that, she just faded away. Some say it was just a matter of time. She was only a baby when Lonnie died, but having bereft parents can scar a child.” Maude tapped the counter with a gnarled finger. “I can never remember the name of that book. But I have a copy. Most folks in Forkstop do.”

Her joints creaking audibly, Maude heaved herself from the stool and disappeared in to her private domain. Dirk could hear her shuffling around and muttering, “Let’s see. Let’s see … Yep. Here it is.”

Maude returned with a trade paperback book. She set it on the counter so Dirk could see the cover image of a prehistoric-looking cross between a shark and a crocodile.

Dirk gasped, grabbing the paperback. “That’s *The Dogged Dogmatist*! I *love* this book!” He stared at it in awe. He couldn’t believe it! He looked at Maude, who was grinning at his excitement.

“I made up a game based on this book—Caverns and Crocodiles. Aaron Sanders’s daughter wrote it? But it says Louisa Jewel.” Dirk tapped the author’s name.

“Jewel is her middle name,” Maude said.

Dirk stared at the cover of the book again, then looked up at Maude. “I have to talk to her!”

Maude studied him for a minute, then nodded. “I’ll make a call, see if we can get you in with a little fib. They might let you in to see her, but don’t expect much.”

★ ★ ★

Dirk wasn't very good at controlling his expectations, so he didn't even bother to try before he entered Mattson State Hospital. Even setting aside how close he was to unraveling the mystery of Felix, he was about to meet one of his favorite authors.

Ever since he'd discovered Louisa wrote *The Dogged Dogmatist*, Dirk had been reviewing what he remembered about the book. Maude had loaned him her copy of the book, but he hadn't opened it yet. He didn't need to. He knew the book well.

The novel had come out when Dirk had turned fifteen, and it had immediately gotten a huge following—most of which consisted of people like Dirk, people who didn't fit in, who wanted to see layers when others wanted to accept things at face value. The novel was the story of a man whose determination to be right proved to be his undoing … *possibly*, anyway. The ending was obscure, and people debated whether the man lived or died at the end. Dirk and Leo had discussed this ad nauseam. Leo was sure the man died. Dirk believed he'd lived.

The whole book was obscure, actually. The gist of the story was a man on a quest to find the prehistoric shark-croc hybrid depicted on the book's cover. The man was led on his quest by a "voice of intuition" he heard in his head. The man's search for the creature was convoluted on the whole, but certain lines in the book went beyond convoluted. They just didn't make sense. Neither did the drawing in the middle of the book—an ornate and frilly sketch of what looked like butterflies and flowers. The drawing was never referred to in the book, and it couldn't be related to any of the story. Were the odd lines and the drawing some kind of code? For what purpose?

Now that he'd been in that water park, though, Dirk thought he knew what they were for. It was starting to make sense … if he was right.

Inside Mattson State Hospital, Dirk followed a redheaded caregiver down a long beige corridor. She looked to be about Dirk's age, but she was taller and very serious.

After the caregiver made a left turn, she stopped in front of the second door on that hallway. "She's in there," the girl said, pointing. "So kind of

you to visit your cousin. People don't come in often enough." Then she turned and walked back down the hall, her crepe-soled shoes making funny spongy sounds as she went.

Dirk flushed at the lie. *So I broke a window and told a white lie*, he said to himself. *People have done worse for less.*

Dirk stepped in to a small yellowish room that contained one hospital bed, two visitor's chairs, a recliner, a bureau, a nightstand, and a TV on a shelf on the wall. The light in the room was dim, and the space smelled like honey, vinegar, and bleach—an odd combination. He looked at the bed's occupant.

Louisa Jewel Sanders didn't look as vacant as Maude had said she was. In fact, she seemed alert. Her gaze was focused directly on Dirk.

A fragile-looking petite blonde woman, Louisa appeared to be in her early forties maybe. She had small features, pale blue eyes, thin lips, and almost translucent skin. Dirk had asked Maude what was wrong with Louisa, and she'd just shrugged. "Some kind of past trauma is the story. She's perfectly healthy, but she can't speak or function on her own. Just sits or lies in her bed and stares."

"Hi, Louisa," Dirk said, slipping in to the room and walking softly to a visitor's chair. He hesitated, then sat, a few feet from Louisa's bed.

Louisa didn't say anything, but her eyes shifted to stay on him.

Louisa was dressed in a simple moss-green smock dress and white socks. The neck of the dress was scooped, and he could see she wore a necklace with a butterfly pendant.

He gestured at it. "That's a cool pendant, a zebra longwing butterfly. I like those."

Louisa might have been silent, but she wasn't out of it. When Dirk finished talking, she touched the butterfly's black-and-pale-yellow-striped wide wings.

Dirk felt a jitter of excitement skitter through his body. He smiled at Louisa. "I've always loved butterflies."

Louisa didn't move.

Dirk wasn’t sure how to begin, so he just jumped in. “I have a lot of good memories from my time in your dad’s restaurant—Freddy’s. We weren’t in the town a long time, but I went to Freddy’s every day while we were here. I liked visiting Felix. Do … ?” He stopped. He was going to ask if she remembered Felix, but he didn’t want to make her upset. Everyone else in Forkstop seemed to hate Felix. He’d talked to a few more people since he’d been with Agnes and Dawn in the diner, and they all had memories similar to those of the two women.

“I want to find Felix,” Dirk said softly. “I was hoping you could tell me if the Freddy’s your dad owned is still … um … around.”

Dirk noticed a vein in Louisa’s neck was starting to pulse quickly. He stopped talking and hurried to change the subject, pulling her novel out of his jacket pocket. “I love your book,” he said.

Louisa looked at the book, then looked back at Dirk.

Dirk waited, not sure what to say next.

Before he could decide, Louisa moved, and Dirk jumped in his seat. Louisa tilted her head slightly and reached up to unclasp the chain around her neck. Removing the butterfly from the chain, she held out her hand to Dirk.

“No, I can’t take that,” he protested.

She held his gaze. He shrugged, leaned forward, and stretched out his hand. She dropped the pendant in to his palm.

“What’s this for?” Dirk asked.

Louisa looked away from the book Dirk held to him and back at the book again. Dirk followed her gaze, and he smiled. He thought he knew what she was trying to tell him. Maybe. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but Louisa closed her eyes. She was done with him.

Dirk watched her for a few seconds, then nodded. He’d gotten what he needed. He was sure of it.

“Thanks, Louisa,” Dirk said.

He got up, tucked the pendant in his pocket, left the room, strode out to his car, and drove back to his motel. In his room, sitting on his sagging

queen-size bed and looking at his plush Felix, which “swam” on the scarred oak nightstand, he called Leo.

“Dirk!” Leo said when he answered the phone. “Everyone’s been talking about you.”

“I doubt that,” Dirk said.

“Well, *we* have.”

Dirk knew “we” were his friends.

“Jenny says it’s our fault you left. Gordon says you’re too determined for your own good. Wyatt wants to go looking for you. He even started researching Freddy’s locations.”

“Tell him to stop. I found it. Or at least I think I did.”

“Really? It’s real? Send pictures.”

“Well, it’s not … yeah, I’ll send pictures.” Dirk didn’t feel like going in to the whole water park thing. “Listen, I called because I have a question. Do you remember that list of pointless clues we made from *The Dogged Dogmatist*?”

“The ones you thought were code? Sure.”

“I don’t have my copy of the book with me. I have *a* copy, but not the one I marked up. I think I remember the clues, but I don’t want to take the time to go through the whole book, and I want to be sure I’m right. Do you have yours?”

Dirk heard a creaking sound, and he knew Leo was sitting in his rolling chair at his drafting table. The sound of rustling papers followed a couple thuds. Leo kept filing cabinets full of scribbled ideas, and apparently, he had a system that worked for him; he could always dig up what he was looking for.

The rustling stopped. For a few seconds, Dirk waited.

“Got it. You remember the weird drawing, right?”

“Yes, I looked at that in the copy I have here.”

“Cool. Want me to read the other four things to you?” Leo asked.

“Yes, please.”

Leo read off the items while Dirk wrote as fast as he could.

“What’re you up to?” Leo asked. “What’s the novel got to do with Freddy’s and the shark?”

“I’m not one hundred percent sure yet. I’ll let you know.”

“Where are you?” Leo asked.

“I’ll let you know when I figure this all out.”

Dirk said good-bye to Leo and told him to tell the others, especially Jenny, he wasn’t angry anymore. He read over the short list Leo had given him and looked at his watch. He barely had an hour if he was going to get to where he needed to go in time. He stood and left his motel room.

★ ★ ★

Instead of parking on the road as he had the first time he’d visited the derelict water park, this time Dirk drove around to the back of the park. He left his car near the trough that led under the fence.

As he had the night before, Dirk came prepared, which hadn’t taken much effort. His pockets held just his flashlight and the list he’d made when he talked to Leo.

Dirk crawled under the fence again. Although it wasn’t raining, he trotted over to the sheltered eating area to stop and think a minute. He perched on the edge of a cold, hard metal bench and looked out at the moss-covered structures pressing in around him. The sky held only a few clouds today, but here in the water park, the day still felt dingy and dark … probably because of all the overgrown vegetation. Dirk had hoped he’d be more comfortable in the park during the day, but the place still gave him the heebie-jeebies.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to focus.

The Dogged Dogmatist’s strange clues were the subject of endless analysis by the book’s fans. Countless theories about them had been put forth—Dirk and Leo and Wyatt had come up with at least a couple dozen of their own. None of the theories had made sense … until Dirk had started thinking about them in the context of the water park.

The entirety of the novel takes place in a desert area—dry and rocky and utterly devoid of water. In spite of this, however, the main character receives two clues that are related to water. The first one directs him to a swimming hole, which doesn't exist, and the second one tells him to follow the flow of the water, which also doesn't exist. The character blithefully ignores the clues, making them seem even more out of place. And he ignores two others as well. The third clue the character ignores comes in a dream in which a wise woman tells him, "The butterfly reveals the key." No butterfly of any kind shows up in the book. The last clue the character ignores is a direction from his inner voice to "be there at 3:33." Because the character never goes anywhere at that hour, Dirk and other readers thought 333 was some kind of numerology clue. However, now he thought it was exactly what it seemed to be, a time of day. And that was why Dirk had hurried over here. He glanced at his watch. It was 3:18 p.m. He didn't have much time.

Dirk, of course, knew that 3:33 could be a.m. instead of p.m., but p.m. was coming first, so he figured he might as well make the assumption that p.m. was correct. If he was wrong, he could come back during the night.

A rustling in the bushes at the edge of the picnic area abruptly plucked Dirk from his mental planning. He scanned the dense foliage encroaching on the shelter. When he spotted a pair of yellow orbs, he gasped, but then the orbs disappeared, and he realized they'd been small. He'd probably just spooked an opossum or maybe a squirrel.

Dirk stood.

If the pointless clues in the novel were directions for finding Freddy's, Dirk needed to get to Floyd's Swimming Hole, which wasn't far from the sheltered picnic area. Thankfully. Dirk had gotten quite enough of poking around the spooky water park the night before.

The Crawberry Flows Water Park might have been in a semi-urban setting—the intermittent shush and vroom of passing cars was a reminder of that—but it was being reclaimed by rural wildlife and vegetation. The night before, once the sun had gone down, Dirk had been serenaded by crickets

and frogs, and he'd jumped at the continual sounds of small animals moving in the bushes. Twice, he'd been startled by owl hoots. This afternoon, the crickets were silent, but the frogs still had a lot to say.

As soon as Dirk started down the narrow path that wound back toward the pool, he heard another sound … a distant howl. That made him freeze. It sounded like a coyote. Could a coyote get through the fence?

Dirk picked up his pace. If his theory was right, he was going to find a way to get underground. The prospect of being in the dark tunnels he expected to find wasn't incredibly uplifting, but at least he wouldn't have to deal with wild animals in tunnels … hopefully.

Passing a loading area for the river rapids on one side and a small supply shed on the other, Dirk's feet crunched over gravel and twigs as he hurried around a corner and aimed toward the massive swimming pool he'd ignored the night before. Another howl echoed through the park, and the breeze picked up, swishing tree branches and bushes. Dirk moved even faster.

After just two more turns and a fight with the low-hanging branch of a maple tree, Dirk arrived at the edge of the huge empty swimming pool. He looked down in to it, but he saw nothing except dirt and dry leaves, and the edge of what was probably a painted design on the tiles at the bottom of the pool. The design was barely visible; most of it was covered by dirt. The breeze was picking up the leaves and swirling them around.

Now what?

Dirk looked at his watch. It was 3:24. He had just nine minutes to wait.

Dirk started walking around the periphery of the pool to pass the time, frowning in concentration as he gazed at every little detail of the area. He found a quarter by the broken-down diving board, but his investigation didn't turn up anything else. He checked the time. Just one more minute.

Looking around the area again, Dirk rolled his shoulders to release his tension. He didn't have any idea what to expect at 3:33, which made him feel like he was about to walk in to something that was more than likely a

trap. Every muscle in his body was taut. He pulled out his flashlight to use as a weapon if needed.

Dirk watched the seconds tick past, and at 3:33 exactly, he raised his flashlight overhead like a club and widened his stance. He listened intently, swiveled his head this way and that.

Nothing happened.

Dirk turned in a complete circle. He stared at everything around him.

He felt like he was in the middle of one of those games where you had to spot what was out of place in the picture. Something must have happened at 3:33. But what? He couldn't see any differences in his surroundings.

Dirk squinted at the area around him for several more minutes, and then, when the sun shone in his eyes, he moved in to the shadow thrown from the nearby waterslide.

Wait a second … Shade. Shadow.

Dirk stepped back out of the shade, and stared at the shadow. He smiled.

The shadow was vaguely arrow-shaped.

Could it be?

Dirk had seen something like this in treasure hunt movies, where clues were often hidden in plain sight. Was it really so hard to believe this sort of thing happened in real life?

Dirk looked at the end of the pool designated by the shadow arrow. The arrow seemed to be pointing to right under the sagging diving board.

Dirk looked down at the bottom of the pool, where the arrow nearly touched the tile. He couldn't see anything.

He glanced at the ladder leading down in to the pool. It was rust-encrusted, and he didn't think he wanted to see if it would hold his weight. He turned and trotted to the shallow end of the pool. Walking down in to the pool, he headed to the spot where the point of the shadow ended. There, he knelt and scraped away several layers of dirt and sediment. He found … nothing.

Frowning, Dirk sat back on his heels. Was he in the wrong place?

He didn't think so.

Was he missing something?

He looked up at the waterslide and past the top of it to the sun. He gasped and snapped his fingers. *The sun!*

The sun wasn't always in the same place in the sky at a given time of day everywhere in the world, obviously.

If 3:33 was related to a cast shadow, the timing would have to be precise for a particular location and time and date. If 3:33 was right for the time and place in the book, it might not be right for *this* date. Dirk grinned at his cleverness. Then he stopped grinning.

What good would his cleverness do? He had no idea how to calculate the right date for this place and time.

What now?

Dirk sat down in the dirt under the diving board. He stared at the end of the shadow arrow. He blinked and leaned forward.

The arrow had retracted from where it had been. As the sun moved, the shadow arrow was being pulled toward the middle of the pool.

Dirk got back on his knees, and he began digging the dirt away from the line cast by the shaft part of the shadow arrow. Of course, what he was doing was about as imprecise as you could get. Maybe at the right time of day, the arrow wouldn't even land in the pool. But he didn't think so. The fact that a swimming hole was one of the pointless clues in the book convinced him he was in the right place. So, he kept digging.

He dug until he got to the edge of the design he'd noticed on the tiles. His heart rate doubled. A design could be a clue. Why hadn't he looked there to start with?

Dirk leaned forward and dug faster around the edge of the design. As soon as he'd moved just a few inches of caked crud, he realized he was on the right track. Part of the design was a zebra longwing butterfly. Panting in his eagerness, Dirk pawed and scraped at the dirt until he'd revealed the whole design.

He whooped. This was the place! The design on the bottom of the pool was a perfect match to the strange ornate drawing in *The Dogged*

Dogmatist!

Dirk grinned at the design. For several minutes, he ran his fingers over the whole design, searching for some kind of hidden handle or something. Nothing. He pulled out the list of clues he'd scribbled down and looked at it.

The flow of water. Next must be the flow of water.

He looked at the design again. Could water flow from here? Maybe at one time, but …

Feeling like an idiot, Dirk lay down on the ground and put his ear against the decorated tiles. If water was anyplace near here, it had to be under the pool. Maybe he'd hear it.

Stilling his breath, he listened.

And he smiled.

He could hear the faint sound of running water. But how to get to it?

Dirk pushed up to a sitting position and looked around the bottom of the pool. Was there a trap door or something he could go through?

He knelt and started pawing at the dirt again. He brushed it farther and farther back from the middle of the pool, but he didn't find anything.

Shifting to his butt again, he frowned. How could he follow the water?

Dirk rubbed a filthy hand over his sweaty face and studied the pool again. He couldn't see anything that suggested a way to follow the water. Changing positions, he looked at the drain in the middle of the pool floor. It was only eight inches or so in diameter. Not nearly big enough for a person to fit through.

Dirk crawled toward the drain. Something about it looked weird, like it was asymmetrical or something. Had it been installed wrong? It looked thicker on one side than the other.

Dirk reached the drain and ran his hand over it. Maybe there was a latch or something that would reveal a trap door under the drain or …

Wait a second.

Dirk changed positions and hunched over the drain. He pressed his fingers hard against the metal on one side. Was he imagining things?

No. He didn't think so.

He used his now-filthy fingernails to scrape out more dirt. He grinned. He wasn't imagining things! There was a depression in the metal at one side of the drain, a depression shaped exactly like the pendant in Dirk's pocket!

Dirk's breath came in eager gasps as he jabbed his fingers in to his jeans pocket. He pulled out the pendant, and holding his breath, he pressed it in to the depression in the drain.

At first nothing happened. He pressed the pendant down more firmly.

He was rewarded with a loud metallic *click* … and part of the drain lifted upward. Dirk leaned over and peered in to the tiny metal compartment that was revealed.

"Yes!" he shouted.

He was looking at a key.

With shaking fingers, Dirk reached in to the compartment and pulled out an ordinary-looking key. As soon as he did, the compartment snapped closed and the pendant popped free.

Dirk stared at the key in his hand. "The butterfly revealed the key." How cool was this?! He was in his own real-life treasure hunt!

The key had to open a building that would lead him to the flow of water. But which building?

Dirk picked up the pendant and returned it to his pocket. Then he held the key, feeling its grooves for a minute while he thought.

Abruptly, Dirk jumped up and brushed himself off. "Idiot! Where would you go if you wanted to follow a flow of water?"

The pump house!

Dirk ran the length of the bottom of the pool and up the slope of the shallow end as fast as he could. At the edge of the pool, he stopped for a second to get his bearings. Then he turned down a path to the left of the pool, and he ran toward the pump house as fast as he could.

★ ★ ★

Just as he knew it would, the key he'd found fit the pump house dead-bolt lock. It took a couple tries to get it to turn—his fingers, sweaty from his run and his excitement, kept slipping off the key—but it did turn, and the door to the pump house opened.

Dirk pulled out his flashlight and stepped in to the murky space crammed full of dirty metal pipes. He turned on his light and closed the door behind him.

Then he stood still to quiet his breathing. He listened.

After just a few seconds, he took a couple steps and felt one of the bulging pipes. It was cool. He put his ear to it. He smiled. A flow of water was moving through the pipe.

Dirk looked down at the key he still held. If he hadn't found it, there was no way he'd have been able to get in this building.

Good thing he was good at clues and puzzles.

Now all he had to do was follow the sound of the water.

Dirk shined his light at the bottom of the pipe, and he saw that it and all the other pipes in the room dropped down through the pump house floor. He played his light back and forth over the dusty concrete. There had to be a way for maintenance workers to get down to the pipes.

He spotted an opening that held a metal ladder bolted to its concrete sides. Dirk aimed his light down the opening and saw that the ladder disappeared in to oily darkness. The pipes must run through tunnels below the park. Taking a deep breath and praying the ladder would hold, he descended.

When he hit ground again, he found himself in a labyrinth of pipe-filled tunnels. Again, he was quiet until he identified the pipe that had water flowing through it. Then, putting one hand on the pipe, and clutching his flashlight with the other, he began following the pipe through the blackness.

★ ★ ★

The flowing water took Dirk on what felt like the longest walk of his life. With just the narrow beam of his light to see and just the faint sound of the water and his hand on the pipe to guide him, it seemed like he journeyed for an eternity through a twisting and turning tangle of concrete and metal. It was a journey that tested his nerve as he never had before. There was a sharp terror at the edge of every sight and sound—terror that he wasn't the only one in the tunnels and, at the same time, terror that he *was* the only one in the tunnels (and would never be found if he somehow got lost). Dirk's exploration took more courage than he thought he had. Without that flow of water, there was no way out of this complex maze of pipes, and he couldn't be sure the water would keep flowing. More than a half dozen times, he thought about turning back and giving up.

But Dirk wasn't a quitter. And he was sure he was on the right track. The very fact that this serpentine trail of pipes existed told him he understood the clues. Aaron Sanders had liked mazes, and this was a maze. As long as Dirk could hear the water, he knew it would lead him to the destination he sought.

And he was right.

Just when Dirk's legs were turning to rubber and his nerve was diminishing to the point of nonexistence, the pipe he was following ascended up through an opening in the concrete ceiling above him. And next to it was another metal ladder.

Dirk didn't hesitate. He quickly climbed the ladder.

He found himself in what looked like one of the maintenance buildings he'd dismissed on his first night of exploring. Oh no. How could Freddy's fit in here?

He felt so let down that his legs nearly gave out. Had he been wrong?

Aiming his light in a circle around him, Dirk caught his breath when the beam landed on the front door of Freddy Fazbear's Pizza.

Not just any Freddy's.

The Freddy's.

He hadn't been wrong!

Dirk waved his light back and forth on either side of Freddy's door, and he could see the moatlike glass enclosure going both ways. He'd found Felix's swimming tube!

"Who's the man?!" Dirk shouted.

Thankfully no one answered him.

Dirk's legs reenergized, and he leaped in joy. He did a little dance of triumph. He'd done it!

He stopped and frowned. The water looked murky, a kind of greenish brown, which made sense. The water probably hadn't been treated in a decade, but it was moving. Dirk could see variations in the dirt that suggested a flowing current. He looked for Felix and didn't see him, so he walked over to Freddy's double doors.

Grabbing the handles, he pulled, and the doors fell back.

"Yes!" Dirk shouted. His voice echoed down the hall and he followed the sound, grinning.

The wooden floors were warped and mushy with age, so Dirk was careful to keep his flashlight aimed downward and his gaze on his feet. If he broke a leg, he wasn't sure how he'd get back out. Dirk watched his footsteps scuff aside dust that had to have been accumulating for at least ten years. No one had been down here in a long time … probably since Aaron Sanders had died.

Dirk could feel his pulse accelerating with each step he took. He couldn't tell if that was from excitement or anxiety … or maybe both.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs that led to the main lobby, Dirk looked up at the swim tube. Again he tried to spy Felix. He didn't see the shark, but that was okay. The encircling tube was big. Felix could have been surfing some other part of it.

Dirk took the black-checked stairs two at a time, leaving footprints in the dust as he went. He couldn't believe he was so close to his goal!

In the lobby, Dirk's flashlight cast creepy shadows across walls painted with murals featuring Freddy, Chica, and Bonnie. Dirk paused and turned in a circle, thinking about the man whose pain had led to creating this place,

creating Felix. Dirk had thought about it, and he was sure Felix was a memorial for Lonnie. That was why Aaron had loved this place so much he'd sacrificed his remaining money to get it hidden and have the pipe maze built. Dirk could understand that kind of grief and obsession. He thought he would have liked Aaron Sanders. He was sorry he didn't get to meet him.

Dirk shook his head. Aaron Sanders didn't matter right now. What mattered was that Dirk had known this Freddy's existed, and he was right! He felt the thrill of vindication, and of his quest nearing its completion. He wasn't sure he'd ever stop riding this high.

Dirk continued on through the lobby, expecting to end up in the dining room. He stopped. The dining room wasn't there. Dirk frowned and shined his light around him. This was definitely Freddy's, but it wasn't the whole pizzeria.

No wonder Freddy's could fit in the maintenance building! The only parts of Freddy's that were here, besides Felix's swim tube, were the entrance, the lobby, and a portion of the old arcade.

Dirk flashed his light in to the gloom, filled with dusty games. Goose bumps sprang up on his arms as the flashlight beam reflected off the metal and plastic surfaces. The old machines looked like frozen giants waiting to be thawed out and reanimated.

Dirk shook his head and redirected his light toward the back of the arcade. The stairs leading up to the swimming tube hatch should be there.

As Dirk followed his flashlight's glow, he heard a humming sound that grew louder as he got closer to the tube's entrance hatch. That had to be the water pump, still chugging along, still coursing water though Felix's domain.

And there! He spotted the stairs leading up to the hatch on top of the swimming tube.

As soon as Dirk saw the hatch, he began to strip off his jacket. He dropped it and his flashlight to the ground, and he pulled off his shirt. Goose bumps immediately sprouted on his arms. It was cold in here. He hoped the water was as warm as he remembered it. He frowned, worried

that the water might be cold. Should he check the heat pump? He cocked his head and listened to the humming. Now that he was here again, Dirk remembered the sounds from his past—a kind of layered rumbling, one hum—the water pump—a bit more bass than the other—the heat pump. Yes, there it was! Good. The water would be warm.

Dirk rubbed his arms and grinned. He climbed the stairs and touched the cool surface of the circular handle on the hatch. The handle was called a dog, he remembered now. How could he have forgotten that?

He hadn't forgotten Felix, though. He hadn't misremembered or made it up! He'd been sure this swim tube existed, and it did. He also knew Felix was still in there, and he was about to prove that he was right about that, too. Not that anyone was in here to see that he was right. But that didn't matter. *He* would confirm he was right, and he'd have the satisfaction of knowing all his stupid friends who hadn't believed him were wrong.

Dirk looked around the area near the hatch. It was dark with mildew, but the face mask and breathing hoses were there.

Dirk remembered that, at this point, an attendant always helped to get you hooked up, but amazingly, he remembered what to do. The face mask was cloudy, so Dirk spit in it and wiped it as clean as he could with his discarded shirt. Once he had it clear enough, he tried to put it over his head. It was too tight, so he took it off and loosened the strap. He put it back on, and this time, it felt fine. He reached for the mouthpiece attached to the breathing tube, wiped it with his shirt, too, and then put it in his mouth. Immediately, oxygen began flowing in through the tube. Good. Everything still worked.

Dirk couldn't smile with the mouthpiece in, but if he could have, he would have. This was it! He was about to be reunited with Felix!

He reached out and turned the dog on the hatch door. It turned easily, and he was surprised; he'd expected it to be rusted.

Taking a deep breath to calm his heart, which was practically doing jumping jacks, Dirk lowered himself in to the tube. As soon as he did, the

hatch slammed closed with a *clank*, and the current pulled him along the tube, away from the hatch.

Dirk flipped over and looked at the hatch as he was drawn by the flowing water away from the door and farther in to the tube.

He frowned. What was bothering him about that door? Something …

Before he could think through whatever it was that was niggling at him, he was carried toward another hatch—a few feet down from the one that he'd used to get in the tube. This one was on the side of the tube, instead of the top.

Dirk was a little nervous about the closed hatch he'd just come through, but he was also excited about seeing Felix. Would the shark come out of the second hatch? Dirk couldn't remember.

The second hatch opened. Beyond the portal, it was dark. But enough light reached though the hatch doorway to reveal slow movement within.

Dirk strained to see through the gloom. At first, he couldn't make out anything. Then, suddenly, a huge blunt nose appeared, and Felix glided silently through the hatch.

Startled, Dirk flapped his arms in the water. He half spit out his mouthpiece and he had to quickly shove it back in before he swallowed dirty water. His heart rate shot up, and he could hear it thrumming in his ears.

After all this time, Dirk had thought he'd be so happy to see Felix. But he wasn't happy at all. This Felix wasn't the Felix he remembered!

Dirk's Felix had been a sleek, beautiful shark with shiny and smooth blue-gray rubbery skin. He had warm dark eyes that seemed to communicate both the sadness Dirk remembered and the desire to connect with whoever came to swim with him. The Felix of Dirk's memories had a mouth full of teeth, yes, but the mouth always appeared to be upturned, smiling, and benign—not menacing.

This Felix wasn't benign.

Time had not been kind to the lonely shark stuck in this dirty water. Felix—even though he wasn't a real shark—appeared to be decomposing.

His skin was no longer shiny or sleek. It was mottled, hanging in strips that fluttered out behind Felix as he swam. The ragged openings revealed Felix's corroded endoskeleton.

Dirk thrashed in the water as Felix's toothy snout brushed against his side. He flailed to get away from the shark. In seconds, Dirk's eagerness had degenerated in to full-blown terror.

As Dirk struggled to swim away from Felix, Felix turned to look at him … with his one working eye. The other eye was dangling out of Felix's face, a black orb bobbing in the water.

Dirk almost spit out his mouthpiece again when a scream burbled up his throat and tried to erupt out in to the water. This wasn't what he'd expected. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be!

He turned away from Felix's one-eyed gaze, but before he did, he tried to find some of the friendly playfulness he remembered in Felix's expression. It wasn't there. Felix's stare was empty and dead.

Rotating away from Felix and swimming hard now, using his feet as flippers, Dirk squinted though his face mask, determined to get back to the entrance hatch as quickly as possible. He had to get out of the tube.

Dirk was three-fourths of the way around the tube when his brain supplied the answer to what was bothering him about the entrance hatch. He saw the hatch in his mind's eye, and he knew what his subconscious had already figured out: The hatch had no handle inside the tube. There was no way to open it.

Dirk again wanted to scream but couldn't.

Why hadn't Dirk remembered that the attendant was the one who'd stopped the current and let the swimmers out after a lap or two? Why had he believed he could do this by himself?

As soon as Dirk had this thought, he noticed he was moving faster through the water, and before he could react, he'd whipped past the entrance hatch again. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that Felix was closing in on him.

Sucking in air through the mouthpiece, Dirk turned and tried to swim harder, but he felt something snag on his pants. He looked back again, and his eyes widened in panic. Felix’s teeth were caught in the waistband of his pants. Dirk kicked his legs, but he couldn’t get free. He grabbed at the material to try and rip it loose, but all he did was cut his hand on one of Felix’s corroded teeth.

Pulling back his hand, Dirk noticed he and Felix were getting close to the entrance hatch again. He prepared himself to try to grab it before he shot past.

There. *Three, two, one …* Dirk reached for the hatch and tried to find something to grip. His hands slid across the metal, and he and Felix continued to whoosh through the tube.

As the current carried Dirk and Felix forward, Dirk had to face the truth. Like the dogged dogmatist had in Louisa’s novel, Dirk had found what he’d searched for, just as he’d said he would. He’d been right. But no one would ever know it.

A wail attempted to exit Dirk’s body, and again, the mouthpiece stopped it. All Dirk could do was scream in his mind as he and Felix continued their entwined and endless journey through the bleak, turbid water.


THE
SCOOP

Mandy Mason shifted in her school desk chair as she tugged on a strand of her hair that had loosened from her two, sci-fi-styled buns. She was in the midst of writing a serious fan-fiction scene for the animatronic game series *Five Nights at Freddy's*. She paused her pencil on her notebook, flicking her eyes toward Mr. Peterson as he got up from his desk to speak to a student. Yeah, she was supposed to be doing homework like the other students during study period, but this scene was literally flashing in front of her eyes, begging to be written.

Her phone vibrated with a message, so she covertly slipped it from her skirt pocket and tucked the phone below the desktop to read the screen.

[TotalMisfit] OMG Did u read FreakStory's latest fic?
[Msquared] SO GOOD
[TotalMisfit] urs is BETTER
[Msquared] Thx … gotta go!

"Mandy, what are you working on?" Mr. Peterson leaned over her.

Mandy dropped her phone in her lap and crossed her chunky black boots. "Um, English, sir."

"Let's have a look." He grabbed her notebook before she could stop him. "Hmm. *The animatronic looked dead, but in all reality, the bear watched and waited for the perfect opportunity to grab the little boy from across the room.*"

Mandy smiled in discomfort as the other students in the room laughed. She cleared her throat as her cheeks heated. "Just a creative writing prompt, Mr. Peterson."

He furrowed his eyebrows and shook his head. "Let's get to the real work now, Mandy. I'm sure Mrs. Gentry isn't assigning you an animatronic bear essay."

More laughter erupted in the classroom.

"Right," Mandy murmured.

Mr. Peterson closed the notebook and slipped it back on her desk as he walked away.

"Fan fiction. *So original*, just like her pink hair. That must be why she thinks up such *great* stories," Melissa Chandler whispered a little too loudly from the desk behind Mandy.

Mandy gave a quiet sigh. *Here we go again.*

"It's like someone threw up diarrhea meds on her head," Lily Jansen giggled back. "Oh, wait, is that what happened to you, Mandy?"

Mandy looked down at her notebook, rubbing the tip of her eraser across the cover. "I dyed it because it works better with my complexion. You should try it sometime."

"Right, like I need help with my complexion."

Melissa leaned toward Mandy's shoulder. "You're a real freak show. You know that, Mace Head? A freak with different-colored eyes." The girls both laughed.

It was true. Mandy had been born with heterochromia, with one brown iris and one green iris. Having two different eye colors really hadn't been an issue with other kids as she grew up until she met Melissa. Then again, Melissa seemed to take issue with everything about Mandy.

Mandy shrugged, even though she felt tension grip her body inch by inch. By now, she was an ace at not showing her emotions. It had taken some time … and more than a few hurtful comments, though. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You would," Melissa said.

"Why are you such a freak?" Lily wanted to know.

Mandy forced a smile. "Lucky, I guess."

"More like cursed," Melissa said, and the girls both laughed.

Yeah. Cursed to deal with you for the past three years.

Melissa was a lot like everyone else at Donavon Prep School for Girls—smart and pampered—except Melissa was over-the-top perfect and *the* richest girl in school. Her red hair was styled with blunt bangs, the straight edges of her hair brushing her shoulders. Her makeup was just the right

shade for her pale skin tone, and her blue eyes were so razor sharp that she could pretty much rip a girl to shreds with a single look. Even worse, other mean girls like Lily orbited around her like she was some sort of evil star.

As for Mandy, her parents did well enough financially to send her to Donavon Prep. Even though it wasn't her style, she wore the school's obligatory uniform—plaid skirt, white shirt, cardigan, and knee-high socks—but she rebelled in her own way by dying her hair. This week it was cotton-candy pink. If the mean girls were going to make a big deal that she was a little different, then she'd go all out. The DP rule book never stated regulations on hair color. Besides, it wasn't like she was a bad kid—she was a straight-A student—but she apparently didn't have the right looks—eye color included—to fit in.

Mandy tried to remember how it all came to be that Melissa hated her. It had been three years of bullying and mean remarks. Had it been because she aced out Melissa on a test their freshman year? Or was it when she answered a question Melissa didn't know during history class? Whatever the case, Melissa had marked Mandy for life with a big, fat bull's-eye.

When the bell rang, Mandy grabbed her backpack and quickly made her way out of class to her locker, leaving behind the annoying giggles of Melissa and Lily. A pathway of students opened when she walked by, as if she was some weird creature to avoid. No one wanted to risk the wrath of Melissa Chandler to befriend Mandy. Most days Mandy felt like a human sacrifice, offered up at the altar of Melissa's cruelty—the other girls knew she was Melissa's favorite target, and there was no way they wanted to take Mandy's place.

Mandy couldn't really blame them.

At her locker, Mandy pulled out her longboard, exchanged books, and shut the metal door. A folded paper had slipped from her locker and dropped to the ground. She picked it up and opened the paper to see a printout of a skinny, odd-looking dog, with its tongue hanging out and its eyes bulging. One eye was colored green and the other brown. Pink buns

were drawn over the ears and MACE HEAD was printed in bold letters above the picture.

Mandy crumbled the paper and grabbed her board, slipped her rainbow backpack to one shoulder, and headed down the hall toward the lobby of Donovan Prep. She tossed the crumbled picture in the garbage can on the way out. In the afternoon sun, she hooked her rainbow backpack on to both shoulders, dropped her board, and rolled on the sidewalk toward home. She pulled a licorice from her backpack and chewed on it as she made a mental list of what she needed to do for the rest of the day.

Finish government econ homework.

Finish the latest fanfic story.

Write a new entry on her blog, *The M&M Scoop*.

Twenty minutes later, she walked through the front door of her home and closed it at her back, leaning against the door. All the window shades were closed, making the large house seem dark and isolated. She rolled her board in to the front closet—her mom hated when she left it out—and dropped her backpack on the settee. She wandered in to the kitchen and grabbed a bottled water and a fresh handful of licorice from the pantry. Luckily, her folks were cool like that and made sure she was always fully stocked.

Her phone rang with a video call. When she answered, her mother’s face flashed on the screen.

“Your hair is pink,” Mom said, instead of hello.

Mandy smiled. “You noticed.”

“What was wrong with the black? At least it was some semblance of normal.”

“Oh, you know, that was my emo phase, Mom.”

Her mom lifted her eyebrows. “And what do you call this phase?”

She shrugged. “Pastel?”

“Mandy—”

“How’s work?” Work was always the same with Mom: busy, busy, busy. But at least it got the focus off Mandy and her mom’s subtle disapproval.

Mom sighed. “Busy as usual. I’ll be home for the weekend. Before my trip to Utah next week.”

Mom worked as a managing rep for one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the business. Her job was constant travel, overseeing reps, and taking a bunch of meetings all the time, where apparently large amounts of medicine were talked about. At least that was what Mandy knew about it. Mom often missed out on a lot of stuff at home, but Mom and Dad had always said their jobs were what provided their wonderful home, Mandy’s schooling, and the lives they wanted.

“Okay, Mom, sounds good.”

“Mandy, please stop bouncing. You are giving me motion sickness.”

“Sorry.” Mandy stilled the best she could. Sometimes she couldn’t help her urges to fidget or bounce.

“I talked to your father in between meetings. He wanted me to tell you it looks like it will be another late one for him tonight.”

Mandy shrugged off the disappointment. “That’s okay.”

“There’s frozen meals in the fridge.”

“I know.” Mandy spun around on one foot.

“Don’t just eat licorice for dinner. How’s school?”

Mandy paused and crossed her ankles. “Amazing.”

Her mom smiled. “Good! Oh, I gotta go, sweetie. I’ll touch base with you tomorrow. Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t, Mom. Bye.”

★ ★ ★

In her room, Mandy twirled around in her desk chair, pushing one foot on the carpet as she spun in a circle, with one licorice hanging out of her mouth. She had Mr. Happy, an old blue stuffed elephant that used to be her brother’s, clutched under her arm as she played *FNAF3* on her phone.

Mandy had always loved playing computer and mobile games. She could be anyone she wanted to be, go anywhere she pleased, and solve problems in every way imaginable. Truthfully, gameplay had become her escape from all the drama at school and from her real life, where it often seemed like she had no control at all.

One summer, she'd stumbled upon the FNAF community—die-hard gamers who loved the series for its scares, who played the games habitually, wrote the fan fiction, and theorized about the game lore. The online community loved trying to unravel hidden mysteries within the FNAF universe.

She had to admit, she was pretty new to the technical side of gaming. She didn't know all the coding stuff, but she was an excellent researcher. She'd discovered an online decompiler that broke down the source code of certain games. At the moment, she was waiting on the decompiler to do just that for *FNAF3*. She'd watched a video game theorist who had found clues in other *FNAF* games' code. She thought this was a supercool idea, so she was trying it out for the first time on her own.

Her laptop pinged, and she stopped spinning in her chair. There was a notification about a new post to her favorite FNAF forum on GamerzUNITE.

When she saw it was a posting about a mysterious missing kid, her excitement took a nosedive. Missing kids were a dime a dozen in FNAF, but since she was bored, she clicked on it anyway. The posting was about a five-year-old boy who had gone missing seventeen years ago. Apparently, there were conflicting details that a man in purple may have kidnapped him.

Mandy made a face. "A purple man? Like William Afton?"

Right then, the decompiler notified her the file was complete. Eagerly, she clicked on the data it created for *FNAF3* and an explosion of images, textures, and small files opened.

"Whoa!" Mandy reached over and grabbed the framed photo of her brother that sat on her desk and put his tiny face to the screen. "Look at this,

Bobby! Pretty cool, huh?” She set his photo back down and attempted to save the data.

“Dang it.” The files for the game were too large to be saved on her laptop, so she started to go through the files online. She wasn’t sure what she was looking for, but she’d know it when she found it. Probably.

She bit down on a licorice and tugged off a mouthful as she checked out the content. The files were mostly images and sounds from the game. She yawned and took a sip of her water bottle. As she was skimming through the bulk of data, an image file called lookshauntednow.jpg caught her interest. Lifting her eyebrows, she clicked on the image.

A colorless photo of an old metal building opened up on the screen.

“What is this?” she murmured.

She zoomed in to the photo the best she could before it became pixelated, looking for something to tell her of the location. The building was pretty run-down. The door paint looked chipped, and there was a crack in one of the front windows. There was a street name, too. “Willow something Road,” she murmured.

Why would this photo be in the files of *FNAF3*?

The point was, it shouldn’t be.

Mandy suddenly shook with excitement in her desk chair, tapping her boots on the carpet. She’d actually found something from the game that didn’t belong, something she hadn’t seen online yet! Was this a clue left by the creator? Was this building supposed to mean something to the game lore? People were going to freak!

Immediately, she downloaded the photo and saved. She logged on to a FNAF forum and uploaded the picture.

Subject: HOT *FNAF3* FIND!!
[MSQUARED] You guys will never guess what I found!! Something new in the files of *FNAF3*!! Have you seen this before? What do you think this photo means??? How do you

think it's related to the game story??? Gimme all your ideas! Help!!!

Mandy was so excited. She once again reached for the old photo of her brother and ran her finger over the frame. "I can't believe I actually found something. What do you think it means about the game? Where do you think the location is? Do you think it has something to do with the main storyline … or maybe this is a teaser for something new? So many questions, you know?"

"Stay here." She set Bobby's picture down next to her. "We have a lot of research to do."

An hour later, Mandy yawned and stretched in her chair. She wrote a quick entry for her blog, then looked at the time. *Yikes*. It was later than she thought … she forgot to do her homework.

Something red flashed in her peripheral vision by her bed, and she whipped her head around.

What was that?

She saw her full bed against the wall. Her game posters were pinned over it. Her tall dresser and polka-dot beanbag were in their usual places by the door.

It was as if she had spotted something move … and then it had disappeared in to thin air. A chill swept over her, and she shivered. *I'm just tired*, she thought. And she'd spent the last five hours reviewing files from a horror game—of course she was going to get spooked. Government econ homework was the perfect thing to give her some grounding … if it didn't put her to sleep first.

"Until tomorrow, FNAF World," she said, and closed her laptop.

M&M SCOOP Entry #216

Something beyond cool happened! I was going through the decompiled files of *FNAF3*, and I found something I don't think belongs. It's a photo of an old, mysterious building. I

could only make out part of the street name in the old photo, so I'm going to have to do some serious research to find the actual location. I'm asking around for answers. I'll keep you posted on what I discover! I am SO EXCITED!—M&M

★ ★ ★

Mandy clambered downstairs the next morning for breakfast, yawning and bleary-eyed. Following the smell of coffee and the toast her father actually *liked* burnt, she turned in to the kitchen and spotted her dad in a dark blue suit and tie. He was reading the latest news on a tablet as he leaned against the kitchen island. His blond hair seemed to shine under the kitchen lights, reminding her that under the pink hair, she had his same coloring.

"Good morning, Mandy Bear," he said, eyeing her. "Late night?"

Mandy nodded and opened the fridge to grab the milk. She shuffled to the pantry and pulled out the chocolate puffs. Dad grabbed a bowl and spoon and set it down for her at the island counter.

"You and I are lucky your mother isn't here to see you. You'd get busted for staying up late, and I'd get busted for letting you."

Mandy squinted at him. He was freshly shaved and showered. His hair was already blown dry and combed neatly. Most days, he got up early and hit the treadmill, so she knew he'd probably already been up for two hours. "You had to work late. How come you're not even tired?"

He smiled and winked. "I was born to live on five hours of sleep, kiddo."

"How's that possible?" she muttered, pouring cereal and then milk. "And why couldn't I get that gene?"

"It's my personal superpower." Her dad shrugged. "So … tell me, how did Mom like the pink?"

Mandy became suddenly fascinated by her cereal. "She loved it."

"Really?"

Mandy nodded as she wiped milk from her chin.

“Hmm.” Dad eyed her in disbelief but didn’t prod the matter as he sipped from his cup.

“So, Dad. You’re good at solving problems.”

“That’s what I do for a living. Why? Got a school project dilemma? Lay it on me, cupcake.”

“Well, I was sort of investigating this game. I found a photo within the guts of the game that wasn’t part of the *actual* game. What do you make of that?”

“So … *not* schoolwork.” Her dad took another sip. “I don’t know, Mandy. Sometimes I think programmers just leave junk in there, right? Things they don’t use? Not everything in there is a clue waiting to be found.”

Mandy snapped awake. “Yeah? Like, maybe someone didn’t *want* it to be found?”

Dad looked suddenly hesitant. “Why? This photo’s not something illegal, is it?”

“No, Dad. Sheesh. What kind of person do you think I am?”

His eyes widened. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

Mandy smiled. “Maybe not. I do have pink hair.”

“So, nothing unique about the photo, then?”

“Nothing that I can tell. Just a random building that could be anywhere.”

Dad sipped his coffee. “That’s kind of what I was getting at. It’s possible the building was used for the game in a way that you weren’t aware of … like inspiration.”

“Inspiration,” she murmured. “Interesting.”

He set down his coffee mug and scooped up his briefcase. “That’s all my brilliant ideas for today, kiddo. Have a great day at school. Don’t get arrested.” He pecked her cheek on the way out of the kitchen. “I have a meeting scheduled later than usual. It could run over—”

“It’s all right, Dad.”

“Maybe I’ll see you for dinner.”

She smiled again. “Yeah, okay.”

They both knew that wasn’t likely.

★ ★ ★

Mandy’s school day seemed to go by in a blur. She found herself zoning out during classes. She was tired, true, but she was more just distracted, turning over the possible meanings of the mysterious building she’d discovered. She was dying to see if other fans had responded to her post—the idea that she could have found a piece of important game lore was so exciting! When the last bell rang, she sprang up and rushed to her locker. The faster she could get out of there, the quicker she could get home and back to the forums.

She spun the locker combo and whipped open the small door.

Something popped from the inside and wet goop flung out, splattering her face and chest. Mandy dropped her backpack and stood frozen in shock.

A burst of applause sounded around her.

Mandy wiped goop from her face, and her hands came away with green slime. She dripped gobs of it on to the floor and spit out the slime that had flown in to her mouth. The goop smelled like toothpaste mixed with shaving cream, but she couldn’t be sure. She turned to hear girls clapping and laughing as embarrassment plummeted inside her.

She had the urge to run. She wanted to scream at them all.

Just leave me alone!

But she could only stand there and be the freak show they believed her to be.

Sure enough, when Mandy cleared her eyes, she saw Melissa, standing at the center of it all. Melissa was barely four foot ten and pretty much looked like a little, evil doll as she cackled. No wonder Melissa and Lily had been strangely quiet during study period. No need to bash Mandy during class when they had *this* to look forward to.

Melissa strolled up to Mandy, her red hair swaying side to side. “Wow, what happened to you, Mace Head?” she clucked her tongue. “You’ve created quite the mess. You’re a real menace to DP, you know? When are you going to realize you don’t belong here, freak?”

Mandy started to shake.

A teacher walked out of a classroom, and Melissa quickly stepped away. “What happened here?” Mrs. Gentry asked in astonishment. She looked at Mandy and the mess on the floor. “Who did this?”

Mandy wanted to point her finger right at Melissa and her gaggle of friends. But she was too upset. Too unsteady. If she talked right at this moment, she might explode on everyone just like the green slime from her locker. She had no proof it was Melissa and her friends, anyway.

Mandy merely shook her head.

“Come on, let’s get you to the office and cleaned up. Move along, everyone. Get going, or it’ll be my pleasure to start pulling people in for questioning.”

A few minutes later, Mandy had calmed down enough to talk to the secretary. No, she didn’t want the office to call her parents. She told them her mom was out of town and her dad was in important meetings and couldn’t be bothered, which was true. No, she didn’t know who had done this to her, which was sort of untrue. She washed off the best she could in the office bathroom. Her throat tightened when she realized the green wasn’t coming off her face all the way. Her pink hair was now spotted with green. She just had to get out of there and get home.

She stopped by her locker to salvage what she could. The janitor was there mopping the floor, smearing green everywhere.

“This’d better come off,” he muttered to Mandy like it was all her fault. “Just get your stuff out, and I’ll try and clean it the best I can. But no promises it will all come off.”

Mandy thought he muttered something about rich kids, but she wasn’t sure. She threw away some papers in to the garbage can the janitor had provided as well as the weird tube contraption that shot green goop at her.

That was when she realized her longboard was gone.

She blew out a frustrated breath. She was barely keeping it together. But she would not break at school. She wouldn't give Melissa the satisfaction. She grabbed the rest of her stuff and placed it in a fresh garbage bag she'd gotten from the secretary.

She stopped by the office to report her missing longboard, then left to walk home. She ignored the weird looks she got from pedestrians. As she replayed the explosion of her locker over and over in her mind, she began walking faster. The pain and humiliation seemed to spread throughout her body like wildfire, and she ran as fast as she could to make it all go away.

It was the fastest she could ever remember running in her life.

★ ★ ★

At home, Mandy took a shower and attempted to scrub all the green out of her hair and off her skin. The green dye eventually came off her skin, but it had stained her freshly dyed pink hair.

As she stared in to the mirror, her eyes burned, but she blinked the sensation away. "Fine, I'll just go purple tonight before bed. I love purple. Everything will be fine." She turned away, gathered up her stained uniform, and threw it in a garbage bag. She washed the stickiness off her boots. There was no cleaning the backpack, though … and she wasn't about to explain this incident to her parents. She'd just have to deal with a green-splattered rainbow backpack for the rest of the school year.

When she was done cleaning up, she sat at her computer and looked at Bobby's picture. "It was a bad day, Bobby." She took a big breath to keep the sadness at bay. "I-I don't know what to do. If I tell Dad what happened, he'll tell Mom, and then Mom'll fly back and … it'll just be an even bigger mess. I just wish you were here with me. Sometimes, I feel like you're the only one I can really talk to."

Mandy picked up the picture again—her brother smiled up at her, just three weeks old in blue footie pajamas. Usually, talking to Bobby made her

feel better, but there was an emptiness in her tonight that threatened to swallow her whole.

Shaking her head, she logged in to the FNAF forums. She was ready to dive back in to the comfort of her favorite world and forget *everything and everyone* from today. She didn't care about anyone at DP; the forums were where her people were, right?

Subject: HOT *FNAF3* FIND!!
[FREDTHEDEAD] No way this is real. I decompiled this game before and I never saw this.
[TotalMisfit] Cool, I'll have to check this out!! Great find!!
[GameRagr] An old building. Wow. Big deal. **Thumbs down**
[ChazPlayz] I tried to find it and couldn't. You sure you got this from *FNAF3*?
[ContrlFreek] Yeah, me too. Couldn't find it.

Mandy frowned at the comments she received from her post the night before. It had forty-three downvotes.

Oh, this day just keeps getting better and better. What do they mean, they couldn't find it? Mandy wondered. The photo *had* been in the decompiled files of *FNAF3*, it didn't belong to the game, and anyone obsessed with FNAF knew that!

Her phone rang for a video chat request from Lindy. Lindy, aka TotalMisfit, was a friend she met online the past year. They kept running in to each other in the FNAF forums and fan-fiction site. Soon they started messaging each other and then recently started video chatting. The only problem was that they lived two states away from each other and had never met in person. And with the distance, they probably wouldn't meet anytime soon.

Oh, and Mandy had learned right away that, at least with Mandy, Lindy was not a total misfit at all. She was also the kindest person Mandy had met in a long time.

When Mandy answered, Lindy's full circular glasses filled the screen. She had rich brown skin with black hair and brown eyes. Her purple frames were always falling down her nose, and Mandy continually watched her push them back up with her finger.

"Hi, Mandy. Whatcha doing?"

"Trying to figure out why no one can find that photo I posted from *FNAF3*."

Lindy sipped from a soda can. "That was such a cool find!"

Mandy's eyes widened. "Did you find it, too?"

Lindy shook her head. "Haven't tried. I've been swamped with homework this week."

"Well, I'm decompiling the game again to see what happened. It was the only thing that looked out of place in the files. I can't believe people think I'm making this up."

"They're all just jealous you found it and they didn't. That or there's a glitch somewhere. I wouldn't worry about it. Besides, shouldn't we all be focusing on *what the photo is* instead of where it came from? Oh! By the way, you should try a reverse image search when you have a sec. Maybe you can find out where the photo originated from? I'll send you the link on how to do it."

Mandy felt a bubble of excitement. "Really? Cool, thanks."

"Sure." Lindy squinted. "Did you dye your hair pink and green?"

Mandy ran a hand through her damp hair. "Not exactly."

"Oh … okay. Something like a science experiment gone wrong, right?"

Mandy smiled. Lindy had this way of making light of things, and Mandy appreciated that. "Pretty much."

"Hate when that happens. So you up for a game of twenty questions?" Lindy asked.

"I got some time." Twenty questions had been their way of getting to know each other better over the last few months. "You go first."

"Okay. What's your favorite ice cream?"

"Easy. Fudge brownie is king. What's yours?"

“Mint chocolate chip. Nondairy. I’m lactose intolerant.”

Mandy made an O shape with her mouth and nodded. “Do you have your driver’s license?”

“Yeah, my dad made me get it right away. He said we all needed to know how to be independent. Don’t you have yours?”

Mandy shook her head. “Not yet. I just have my permit. My mom keeps bugging me, but I freak out every time I’m on the road, which hasn’t been a lot lately. It’s on my to-do list. Do you have any siblings?”

“Two.”

“Two? Wow.”

“Yeah, I’m the middle child. According to my psychology class, I have a need for attention.” Lindy shrugged and pushed her glasses up her nose. “Not so sure about that. You have any siblings?”

“Um, well, not anymore.”

“Oh?” Lindy’s eyes widened behind her lenses. “I’m so sorry, what happened? Is it okay to ask? I mean, I don’t want to be—”

“No, it’s okay. My brother died when he was a baby, and I never got to meet him. They’re not really sure why he died. Sometimes babies just don’t make it, I guess.”

Lindy nodded. “I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine not having my brothers around me … even if they are completely annoying.”

“What are their names?”

“James and Thomas. What was your brother’s name?”

“Bobby.” She switched the phone over to her desk, showing Lindy the photo of Bobby. “This is him.”

“Totally cute in baby-blue pajamas.”

“Thanks.” Mandy walked out of her room, twirling a lock of hair around her finger as she strolled downstairs to the kitchen to grab a water. “What’s it like to have brothers, anyway?”

Lindy pursed her lips and looked upward as if she was thinking about it. “Well, they’re loud and smelly, and mine like to wrestle. Sometimes they steal your fries and *definitely* invade your privacy. One time, my older

brother stole my diary and read it aloud to the whole family. I got him back by calling a girl he liked but was too scared to call. He wouldn't talk to me for a week, but he got over it."

To Mandy that all sounded wonderful. She often dreamed of growing up with Bobby as a big brother—how they'd always be together, playing games, hanging out. Maybe they would even get on each other's nerves. Her heart gave a little clench every time she thought about it and knew it would never happen.

"But … other times, they can stick up for you when your parents get on your case or when you need some cheering up. And one of them is always around. I'm never by myself, which can also be super annoying. Family is family, though."

Family is family, Mandy thought. From the fridge, she grabbed a bottle, then walked to the living room and plopped on the couch.

"Oh, hey, I gotta go. Mom's calling me. I'll message you later. Coming, Mom!"

"Okay—"

Lindy was suddenly gone.

Mandy set her phone in her lap as she sat in the middle of her large, empty living room, completely alone.

She started to stare in to space, imagining Bobby still alive and grown just like her. He'd have dark hair like Mom, and he'd have been tall and slim like Dad. Maybe he'd crack jokes, and maybe he'd be in to video games or be some kind of a star athlete. Something flickered at the top of the staircase, catching Mandy's attention—a small blue shoe was on the top step.

Mandy sat up quickly on the couch and watched it shift out of view. One second it was there, and by two seconds, it was gone. Mandy got up and moved slowly to the hall closet, where her dad kept a baseball bat. After grabbing the bat, she crept up the stairs, gripping the railing hard with her free hand. She looked down the hallway, then searched each room and bathroom trying to understand what she had seen. When she had looked

everywhere she could and didn’t find suspicious little blue shoes or the person wearing them, she just shook her head.

“I’ve been playing too much *FNAF*.”

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That evening, after dying her hair from cotton-candy pink/slime green to a passionate purple, Mandy searched again through the newly re-decompiled *FNAF3* files one by one, looking for the picture of the metal building. This time she was going to take a screenshot of the discovery so others would believe that it came straight from the game’s files. Then she’d have solid proof to show everyone she wasn’t lying.

Only problem was … she couldn’t seem to find it.

Where is it?

It had been there just last night. She hadn’t created it out of thin air. When she got to the end of the files, her head started to throb, but she didn’t care. She started right from the beginning again, to see if she accidentally skimmed over it.

Second time through, she still couldn’t find the picture.

Defeated, she slouched back in to her desk chair.

How could it be there one night and then gone the next?

She rubbed her eyes with her fingers. How was anybody going to believe her when the proof was gone? She didn’t understand how it could have suddenly disappeared. She logged back in to the forum and updated her thread.

Subject: HOT *FNAF3* FIND!! (Not so much)
[Msquared] Guys, I don’t know what happened. The photo was really there in the game files last night … now it’s just gone. Disappeared. Like someone took it from the files. I’m not sure why.

She felt stupid. Why had she posted the photo so quickly? Why hadn't she taken a screenshot for proof the night before? GamerzUNITE was her safe and happy place, where she could be herself. Now she was suddenly looking like some kind of flake that no one believed.

Why are you such a freak show, Mandy?

Her eyes started to burn again so she blinked a few times. She inhaled and blew out a slow breath, then squared her shoulders. This wasn't going to stop her from finding out where the picture came from. She knew the picture *had* been in the *FNAF3* files, even if no one else believed her. That it was real. It had to mean something to the game lore or be connected to the FNAF universe in some way. Maybe it was like her dad had said—it was there for a reason the players weren't aware of, like for inspiration.

She clicked on the link Lindy had sent to her and started the reverse image search. She put the strange lookshauntednow.jpg image through a search engine to see where the photo might have originated, or even where this building was actually located. After a couple of minutes, several links appeared, pages, in fact, with possible leads. The list kept growing … this was going to take forever. Goose bumps rose on her arms, and she shivered in her chair. She was suddenly super cold.

She sighed, spinning her chair around to get a sweater—and froze.

Peering around the corner in to her bedroom was a small child, looking at her. Mandy held her breath and didn't dare move.

The child looked to be a boy about five or six with brown hair. He was tucked behind the doorway, covering most of his body. She saw his little hand gripping the doorjamb, the shoulder of his bright red shirt. One eye peered at her.

She blinked, and he was gone.

Mandy released the breath she'd been holding and started to tremble in astonishment. She waited a moment to see if he would appear again, but he didn't. She pushed herself up out of the desk chair and slowly walked to her doorway, stepping out in to the hall. She wasn't sure what she expected to

see, but all she saw was her normal hardwood floor and eggshell-colored walls.

“That was … super weird,” she whispered, then ducked back in to her room, shut the door, and locked it.

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Mandy awoke in the dark, her heart pounding, but she wasn’t in her bed. She was lying on a hard floor in her pajamas, freezing. She pushed to her bare feet with a shiver, trying to understand where she could be.

This wasn’t her house, either. She could sense the space around her was too large, too open. She reached out with her hands as she walked, hoping she wouldn’t run in to something. She finally felt a wall and glided her hands across the cold, grimy surface as she took small steps. Her eyes began to adjust, and she realized she was in some kind of a warehouse or large building.

A faint yellow light clicked on in the large area, making her blink to adjust to the strange lighting. She spotted a box of animatronic heads and body parts on a black-and-white-checkered floor.

“No way,” she whispered. She was pretty sure she recognized Fazbear’s Fright, the haunted house from *FNAF3*. Her heart started to pound in excitement and fear. Was she dreaming? She had to be … right?

Before she could think what to do next, the small boy she’d seen in her room appeared in front of her. She recognized his red shirt, jeans, and blue sneakers. Up close, she could see that his brown hair was sort of spiky and mussed. His dark eyes looked empty.

“Hi,” she said, unsure of how to start. “I’m Mandy. You’ve been visiting me, haven’t you? What’s your name?”

The ghost didn’t respond; he just stared at her in a despondent way.

“Weird meeting you here, huh?” Mandy glanced around, wondering how she could get out of here, when she was pretty sure “here” didn’t exist

in the real world. “Why do you think we’re here?” She rubbed her arms trying to get warm, and her teeth started to chatter.

“Do you know the way out?” She stepped toward the little boy, but in a flash, he spun around to run.

“Oh, snap. Wait! Stop!” Mandy took off after him down the hallway from which she’d spent countless hours fending off animatronics. Her feet slapped against the hard floor. “It’s not safe here! There are things that want to hurt you!”

Man, the kid was quick! He turned corners and ran through rooms too fast for her to keep up.

“Stop! Come back!”

She saw a flash of his red shirt as he sped in to a room. She shoved through the door after him, but when she looked around, she couldn’t find him. She was in some sort of storage room. Shelves lined every wall, all filled with animatronic parts. There was a bear head, a small box of eyes, an arm, and legs.

“Hey, come out, please,” she whispered, although she wasn’t sure why. A big box was set off to the side. She looked behind it, and there he was, sitting down, his legs pulled to his chest and his face tucked to his knees.

He was hiding. Poor little guy.

“Hey, don’t be scared. I’m not going to hurt you.” She got down on her knees in front of him. He lifted his head, and a chill skittered down her spine.

In the yellow lighting, his eyes were so dark, it was as if empty pits stared back at her.

“Uh, it’s okay to be scared. We can get out of here together. Come on, take my hand.” She reached out her hand, but the boy didn’t move to take it. “Please, I can help you. What’s your name, anyway?”

She moved closer, her knees scraping against the floor as she reached out to him. She hesitated when a strangled growl echoed in the room.

“What is that?” she whispered. A wave of fear and adrenaline washed over her. She peeked over her shoulder, expecting to see a freaky

animatronic and exhaled when nothing was there.

She turned back toward the boy, and he sprang at her—his mouth gaping wide, his teeth huge and sharp.

Mandy screamed as she jerked upright in her bed. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” she whispered as her pulse fluttered erratically. She searched around her dark bedroom. She was at home. She was okay.

“Just a bad dream. A bad, bad dream. It’s over now.” She licked her dry lips as her pulse began to settle. She grabbed Mr. Happy and tucked him under her arm as she rested her head back on the pillow.

But her eyes lingered on her locked bedroom door.

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The next day at school, Mandy was nervous returning to Donavon Prep. She wouldn’t meet anyone’s eyes as she walked to her locker. Usually, she held her head high as she walked the halls, but today she just didn’t have it in her. She could sense other girls looking at her, whispering behind her back. It made her want to hunch over in mortification and shame—the freak show who really had become the entertainment of the week.

After the strange dream last night, she hadn’t been able to go back to sleep and she just tossed and turned until breakfast. Now she felt a little like a zombie that everyone couldn’t help to stare at with shocked amazement. She passed by Melissa and Lily in the hall and they burst out in laughter, and all the pain she felt yesterday came tumbling back to her. She clenched her hands in to fists.

It doesn’t matter, she told herself. *I just need to get through this day.*

When she got to her locker, she spun the combo and slowly opened the door to make sure there were no hidden surprises. A few girls giggled at that. To Mandy’s relief, everything was normal and nothing puked at her face. She just had to put in some of the newly clean books she’d taken home with her the day before. Her phone vibrated with a message from a number she didn’t recognize. When she clicked on the message, a

boomerang photo of herself appeared, with green goop launching at her face from the locker. It was like watching her own nightmare on replay over and over again. Mandy clenched her jaw and deleted the message, blocking the unknown number. Then, with her head down, she slammed her locker closed and rushed to her first class.

At lunch, she found the tree she always sat under. She started messaging with Lindy:

[Msquared] Do you believe in ghosts?
[TotalMisfit] Yeah, kinda, but I've never seen one. Have u?
[Msquared] I think I did last night, then I dreamed of him
[TotalMisfit] Him???
[Msquared] A little boy who doesn't talk and just stares at me
[TotalMisfit] Wow, that is CREEPY
[Msquared] Totally

Mandy typed "Why do ghosts haunt?" in to a search engine on her phone. She clicked on a couple of website links and articles that appeared.

Unfinished business? With me? Not that I know of.

They have a message to tell you. Okay. What kind of a message?

They don't know they are dead. Hmmm. I sure don't want to be the one to tell him after the gaping-mouth scare.

Basically, she was still at a loss as to why the ghost kept appearing to her. When it was time for study period with Melissa and Lily, Mandy kept her head down while doing her homework.

As usual, the girls struck up one of their fascinating conversations.

"Mace Head, I mean, Mandy. I just love the purple," Melissa said, quietly from behind her.

Mentally, Mandy rolled her eyes, bouncing her knee underneath her desk.

"What's the matter, Mandy, you didn't care for the green?" Lily piped in. "We could have called you watermelon head."

Mandy remained quiet.

"Oh no, Mandy's not talking to us, Lily. I think we hurt her widdle feelings."

"What's the matter, Mandy? You're too good to talk to us now that you have purple hair?"

"Maybe we broke her, Lily," Melissa said, barely holding back laughter.

"Oh, that's perfect!"

Mandy didn't respond. Couldn't. She acted as if they weren't even there. The truth was, she hated confrontation, and yesterday she'd been hurt in a way she couldn't soon forget. She felt like a punching bag, bruised and beat-up. But she was beginning to realize that letting them know that they had defeated her hurt even more. She felt she was at some kind of emotional crossroads. She could stand up for herself by acting like what they'd done didn't bother her, or she could sulk away, defeated and broken. Usually, she'd go with the first option, but she no longer had the willpower to make that choice. So the sulky, defeated, and broken Mandy would have to suffice for now.

Finally, she got through the study period and made it home without any further incident. Diving back in to the FNAF mystery photo was just what she needed to forget all the drama at school. She had learned to take the things that didn't make her happy and put them away in small, imaginary boxes, hidden away from her daily life so they couldn't hurt her anymore. It was a strategy that worked, and she was sticking to it.

It took some time going through pages of search engine links for the mystery building, but Mandy finally discovered a website that gave her a clue to the odd lookshauntednow.jpg image. Within a city website for a small town called Peace Valley, there was a picture of a similar-looking building in color.

"This has to be it," she murmured. She pulled up the original photo and compared it to the size and style of the old buildings, right down to the color of the chipped door. "*Yes,* this is it. Now … where's Peace Valley located?"

She clicked on a location link. This building was indeed real, located in Utah, and the address … was on Willow Field Road! Mandy leaped from her chair, pumped her fists in the air, and danced around her bedroom, singing.

She couldn't believe she'd actually found it! She grabbed Bobby's photo. "I did it, Bobby. I located the real building!" She spun around until she was dizzy and fell on to her bed, breathing hard as her bedroom spun.

"I have to tell Lindy." She sat up and sent a quick message to Lindy that she'd found the real location of the building, followed by a line of happy-faced emojis.

Then she sprang up out of bed and map-searched the actual address. The location came up as a movie theater called Old Cinemas that played silent films.

Mandy nodded. How cool would it be to go to an old theater and watch a silent film? Maybe something scary like an old Lon Chaney flick?

Mandy's phone rang with a video call from Lindy, which Mandy answered with a scream.

"Ahhh!" Lindy seemed to drop the phone, but then she picked it up, and her face reappeared. "Sheesh, what's the matter?"

"I found the building! It's an old-timey movie theater in Utah."

Lindy's eyes went big. "I live in Utah!"

Mandy's mouth dropped open, then split in to a grin. "I totally forgot! This is getting better and better!" She spun around and then put the phone in front of her face. "Okay, okay, let's get serious here. Why would a photo of an old cinema house titled lookshauntednow be hidden within the files of *FNAF3*, and then when discovered, be completely removed?"

Lindy nodded, her expression very intrigued. "I smell a conspiracy."

"Exactly … and I'm going to solve it."

Lindy lifted her eyebrows. "Hey, I just noticed your hair is purple. It's so you."

Here are the facts:

1. AFTER DECOMPILING *FNAF3*, I DISCOVERED AN ANOMALY WITHIN THE GAME IMAGES. IT WAS A COLORLESS PHOTO OF A MYSTERIOUS BUILDING. THE IMAGE WAS CALLED LOOKSHAUNTEDNOW.JPG.
2. I POSTED THIS DISCOVERED PHOTO ON A FORUM AND THE NEXT DAY … POOF! IT WAS GONE FROM THE GAME FILES. ERASED!
3. I REVERSE-IMAGE-SEARCHED THE PHOTO (SOUNDS COOL WHEN I SAY IT LIKE THAT!) AND DISCOVERED THE BUILDING IS LOCATED IN A PARTICULAR STATE. THIS BUILDING IS OF AN OLD MOVIE HOUSE! (I CAN'T SHARE ALL MY SECRET FACTS YET UNTIL I SOLVE THIS GAME THEORY!)

Stay tuned for more … —M&M

★ ★ ★

"Purple, Mandy, really?"

Mandy froze at her computer screen, then smiled. Her mother was standing in her bedroom doorway. Her mom's black hair was styled in an elegant flip. Her black suit fit her slim frame perfectly, and she was even wearing the power heels to match.

"Mom, hi! Doesn't this color make you think of grape juice?" she asked her. "You remember how much I used to love that stuff?"

"That isn't what comes to mind, no." Mom sighed and walked to her, bending down to give her a quick hug. "Truthfully, I think of … eggplant."

Mandy took in her subtle perfume. It always brought Mandy comfort. "Really? How was your flight?"

"Tiring, but it's good to be home for a couple of days before I head out on Monday."

Mom glanced over at Bobby's picture next to Mandy's laptop and ran a finger over Bobby's little face. She blinked and straightened. "I need a shower."

Mandy nodded. "Where are you off to on Monday again?"

Mom turned and walked toward the hallway. "Cedar City. It's in—"

“Utah,” Mandy finished.

“Yup,” Mom called over her shoulder as she walked away. “Dinner in an hour.”

Mandy’s eyes widened, and she smiled. Oh, snap! This was absolutely perfect—Lindy was from Cedar City. She could meet Lindy! And maybe the two of them could actually visit the mystery building in real life, to see if there were any clues to the connection to *FNAF3*. Excited, she stood and started to pace around her room. Now the only question was, how was she going to convince her mom to take her along?

An hour later, Mandy strolled in to the kitchen. When Mom was home, there was actual fresh food for dinner. No frozen food or ordering out. Mom *loved* to cook. Mandy sniffed the air when she walked in the kitchen. Definitely pasta. She could smell the mouthwatering artichoke marinara and boiling noodles. Oh, and the homemade garlic bread! Yum.

“Thank you, Mom!”

Mom was dressed in sweats and a sweater, her face bare of makeup, her hair wound up in a small bun. She smiled as she chopped vegetables for a salad. She was going ham on the veggies, chopping with the cool precision and speed of a sous chef. It was amazing how she did that. Mandy wondered often if there was anything her mom couldn’t do.

“I know you don’t have enough freshly cooked meals when I’m away.” Mom paused for a moment. “Maybe we should hire a cook when I’m gone …”

“No, that would be weird. Dad’s hardly home for dinners, anyway.”

“But you are.”

“That’s not important.”

Mom met her eyes. “Mandy, don’t say that. Everything about you is important.”

Mandy’s chest tingled a little at her words as she watched her mom finish cutting up the vegetables.

“Mom, turns out I’m doing research on a historical building in a small town in Utah, and since you’re going to Cedar City, I was wondering—”

Mom shook her head. "Mandy, I'm sorry, but Utah's a big state. I don't know if I'll have time to go where you need me to. I do have an assistant, though. Maybe I can bribe her to help us out. She loves chocolate truffles —"

Mandy laced her fingers together. "No, I mean, can *I* go with you?"

Mom paused, her mouth dropping open. "And miss school?"

Mandy nodded. "How long is your trip?"

"Three days."

"I can email all my teachers. They'll send me all the homework. Please, Mom, it's important to me."

Mandy watched her mother stir the pasta and then the marinara, deep in thought.

Nervous, Mandy twirled a stray lock of hair around her finger. "And you know my good friend, Lindy? I introduced you on the video call last month? She lives in Cedar City, and I might actually get to meet her in person for the first time. When will I ever have another chance like that? And you're always saying, 'Don't let good opportunities pass you by, take them as they come before they disappear for good.'"

Mom smiled. "Okay, okay, okay. I'm glad you actually listen to me. I was just thinking I probably won't be able to spend much time with you because my entire trip is booked solid with work—"

"Perfect."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean, it's okay. I'll be busy with research and hanging out with Lindy. I thought I would never get to meet her. She's like my closest friend."

"Don't you have close friends at school?"

Mandy crossed her arms, realizing she'd almost tipped her hand. "Um, yeah … but Lindy and I just click."

Mom frowned as if she was trying to remember when Mandy last had a friend over to the house. "How come you haven't invited anyone over in a while?"

Mandy lifted her eyebrows. *In a while? Try three years.*

Mom finally gave up. “Okay, if it’s that important … but you be sure to get all your makeup work ahead of time. *And* you’re going to complete it by the time we get back.”

Mandy bounced up on her toes. “Yes! Thank you, Mom! You’re the best!” She hugged her and sped out of the room to call Lindy.

★ ★ ★

Mandy was sort of bummed she didn’t get a window seat on the plane, but she was mostly just excited to be on her way to Utah to meet Lindy in person for the first time … and to get a chance at seeing the mystery building.

Mom was next to her, doing her best to work on her laptop with minimal elbow space. There was a crying baby on board, and Mandy was following the cues of those around her … putting earplugs in her ears.

It had been some time since Mandy had been on a flight. When she was little, there was a lot more family vacation travel with both of her parents. But somewhere in the past five years or so, vacations became few and far between. With every new promotion, her parents’ jobs had become more demanding, giving them a bigger workload and less time for family.

Mandy had a perfect view down the airplane aisle, giving her easy access to people watching. Across from her was an older woman with white hair, wearing glasses. She had a blanket on her lap as she read a book, a tattered old murder mystery. In front of her seat sat a man in a business suit, checking email on a tablet. Behind the older woman, a man in a hoodie, shorts, and headphones bopped his head to the music. It made Mandy smile.

A flight attendant passed by, and Mandy shifted to see down the long aisle. She saw a little boy, kicking out his foot.

He wore an uncomfortably familiar blue sneaker.

Unease shifted inside her as she moved back to her headrest. Just a coincidence to see the same little blue shoes, right? It couldn’t be the ghost.

Taking a breath, she peeked out again, but the little shoe was no longer kicking out in to the aisle. Mandy settled back in to her seat and closed her eyes.

“Little boy,” someone called out.

Mandy’s eyes whipped open.

She stuck her head out in to the aisle again. There was a little boy running in the opposite direction of Mandy. He had brown hair, a red shirt, jeans, and blue shoes.

Mandy flashed cold. No, this wasn’t a dream. She was wide awake. Right? She pinched herself and it hurt. Just to be sure, she reached over and pinched her mom.

“Mandy.”

“Sorry, just checking if this is a dream.”

Mom frowned and shook her head. “With the baby constantly crying, it’s actually kind of a nightmare. Luckily, it’s a short flight.”

“Little boy, return to your seat, please,” the flight attendant called out, passing by Mandy and going after the runaway boy. Mandy craned her neck trying to see the boy’s face.

The flight attendant caught up with the kid. She took his hand and turned to lead him back to his seat. Mandy still couldn’t see what he looked like. “Lady, move, already,” she whispered.

“Mandy, what are you doing?” Mom asked her.

“Just trying to see something,” Mandy murmured. Unfortunately, the flight attendant continued to block her view as she sat the boy back in his seat. Once he was seated, the little blue shoe kicked out in the aisle again.

Mandy couldn’t wait any longer. She pushed up from her seat, ignoring her mom, calling after her. She walked quickly to the boy and stopped beside his seat.

A little boy with blue eyes stared up at her. He wore a red shirt with a big red dog. He had freckles on his face and a brown birthmark on his chin.

It was just a kid, not the ghost.

Her shoulders sagged in relief.

“Can I help you?” a frazzled woman asked, sitting beside the boy. She was trying to settle her crying baby by patting his back.

“Uh, no, sorry. Thought I saw someone I knew. My mistake.”

“Miss, you’ll have to return to your seat, please,” the flight attendant told Mandy.

Mandy turned and smiled. “Yes, I’m, sorry.” She squeezed passed the attendant to walk back to her seat.

At the far end of the aisle, Mandy felt a fresh wave of adrenaline as she saw a familiar flash of red while taking her seat.

★ ★ ★

Wow. Mom’s hotel suite was pretty swanky. There were two bedrooms, two baths, a lounge area, and small kitchenette. Elegant maroon and gray designs were spread across the suite, from the hanging wall art down to the pillows and lamps. A basket of fruit and nuts waited for them on a small table.

“You always stay in places like this, Mom?” Mandy asked her.

“Sometimes. Most times they’re bigger.” She set her purse and briefcase down, and motioned to the bellboy. “Just set the luggage by the door, please.” She tipped him, and the man left.

“I’m sorry to drop you off and run, but I have a lunch meeting scheduled. I wasn’t planning on having a traveling companion this time around.”

Mandy waved a hand. “It’s okay, Mom. I told you, I’m doing research.”

“Yes, for a project. What kind of project is this again?”

“No big deal, just the history of a historic silent movie theater. It’s about twenty minutes away in a town called Peace Valley. Small town, only about three hundred twenty residents.”

“Oh, okay.” Mom’s phone rang, and she answered, then called out to Mandy. “Order your lunch. I’ll check in with you later. Love you.” She

scooped up her purse and briefcase and marched out the door, giving orders to someone on the phone.

Mandy just waved at her retreating back. She walked to the large window and gazed at the distant mountains of Utah. The sun shined down from a clear blue sky. *Peaceful*, she thought. She went to her backpack and pulled out Bobby's framed photo.

She faced him toward the view. "Really nice, huh, Bobby?" She set him down on the small table and dialed Lindy for a video chat.

Lindy's happy face appeared on screen. "You're here?"

Mandy flung out an arm dramatically. "Yes, Utah, here I am!"

Lindy squealed. "This is so cool! We're finally in the same state."

"I know!"

"How was the flight? I've never been anywhere else."

"It was good. A little bumpy for a minute, and my ears popped as we landed. Always happens. When can we meet up?"

Lindy sighed, pushing up her glasses. "Not until tomorrow. I have to take my brother to Little League practice because both my parents are busy today and my older brother has to work. But right after school, I'll meet you at your hotel. I mapped out the address and I'm only fifteen minutes away on the highway!"

"Sounds awesome! I'm going to do some research at the town records on Old Cinemas and see if anything interesting pops up."

"Sounds fun, wish I could be there, too."

"No worries, we'll be together tomorrow."

After they disconnected, Mandy grabbed Bobby's photo and slipped it inside her backpack. She pulled out a package of licorice and hooked her backpack on to her back. She'd searched the city website for bus information and the city hall location. It took her a half hour on the city bus to get to the local recorder's office at city hall, where she could research more on the history of the mystery building. Peace Valley was so small, it didn't have its own city hall or even a police station. Luckily, Mandy had the town's information right at her fingertips in the recorder's office.

According to the records, Old Cinemas used to be another business over seventeen years ago called Sideshow's Snack Shack, a small family food diner. From there, Mandy researched any information in the city records to tell her about the old eatery. The business lasted for about three years, but foreclosed seventeen years ago. Next, she researched the old newspaper records for anything regarding Sideshow's Snack Shack.

She skimmed the papers for the first year of the business and found the grand opening announcement with the headline:

GRAND OPENING!

SIDESHOW'S SNACK SHACK

FAMILY FOOD & FUN!

She skimmed the following years for any news on the business. A headline caught Mandy's interest: YOUNG BOY PRESUMED KIDNAPPED AT SIDESHOW'S SNACK SHACK. The date seemed to be a few weeks before the diner closed its doors for good. The article stated a five-year-old boy went missing at the eatery one Friday afternoon. One moment the boy was playing a pinball machine, and then the next moment, he'd just disappeared. The mother as well as the staff searched frantically for the boy before the police arrived. Once the police began questioning the customers, frantic accounts were given of a mysterious man having been near the boy before the disappearance.

"Wow," Mandy murmured. She glanced at the copy of the man's featureless sketch. Dark eyes and hair, straight nose, flat mouth. The man was just so … ordinary. For some reason, the paper sketch of the suspect had been printed hastily with purple ink and they'd called him—

"The purple man," Mandy whispered in amazement. She'd heard of a story very similar to this online somewhere.

Where had she read about this?

Then she remembered!

The thread on missing children in the FNAF forums.

On her phone, she logged back in to the missing children thread, skimming through the posts until she found the one about the missing boy and the purple man. The post did mention Utah and a family diner. All the other details were so vague that some of the comments stated they believed this missing boy story was fake, especially the point about the purple man.

In a rush, Mandy made copies of the pertinent research to take everything back with her to the hotel.

This mysterious building was turning in to one interesting case—an old building, a missing boy, a family food diner, and a purple man. It was perfect fodder for a FNAF fan-fiction piece. *All that's missing is a possessed animatronic.*

★ ★ ★

Mandy stepped in to a darkened room with rows of party tables set up. Party hats were lined up one by one on the tables like festive soldiers. The air was cold, and when she blew out, a white mist floated in the air and disappeared.

"Freddy's," she breathed as she walked down the rows of tables in amazement. To one side of the room was the animatronic show, just like in the games she played. She glanced up at the wall and spotted the surveillance camera. Just because she could, she waved, but then when she saw her arm covered in a dark shirt, she looked down at herself. She wore a dark button-down shirt, slacks, and boots.

Mandy's eyes widened in disbelief. She was dressed like a security guard from the games.

The next moment, she whirled around, her heart pounding. Had she heard a scrape of a shoe? Or had someone moved something? She searched the shadows for something creepy but saw only empty darkness. A whisper of unease passed through her.

Pulse fluttering, she started to walk fast out of the party room, glancing over her shoulder. She had this feeling like she was being watched, like

something very bad lurked just behind, ready to jump at her. When she got to the doorway of the room, she stopped abruptly.

The ghost stood in front of her, in his red shirt and blue jeans. This time she noticed a character on his shirt—some kind of a bear logo. The boy looked sad, but she wasn't certain he was just an innocent, lost little boy anymore. She was scared to get close to him after what happened in her last dream. His skin seemed paler here, his cheeks sunken in, and there were dark circles rimming his eyes. His hair appeared limp and greasy.

"Um, hey, there," Mandy said to him. "So, how do we get out of this dream?"

The ghost hissed and flashed a mouth full of sharp teeth.

Mandy stumbled back, knowing there was only one way out of the room. She rushed past the ghost as the familiar growling began. He reached for her, his hands slashing through air, and she darted across the black-and-white-checkered floors. She ran through the arcade, passed by the restrooms, and found a door to a room with a sign that said EMPLOYEES ONLY.

She kept looking behind her, though she couldn't see the ghost. She still had a feeling he was there. *Always* there, just currently somewhere she couldn't see him.

She pushed through the door, her heart racing, and slammed it shut. When she turned, she screamed. The ghost stood in the room, his dark, empty eyes glaring at her. She pushed up against the door as if she could crawl through the wood.

"What do you want?" she yelled at him. "Just leave me alone!" He took a step toward her, and her stomach curled. "Stay away from me!"

He jumped on her, his face morphing in to something ghoulish—eyebrows slanted, teeth somehow bigger and sharper—and she screamed as he tore at her with his hands. Scratches burned in to her skin. She tried to push at him. She shoved her hand to his neck and recoiled when her hand caved in to corroded flesh.

“Help me!” Mandy screamed.

“Mandy! Wake up, Mandy!”

Mandy sucked in air and opened her eyes to find her mom looming over her. Her mom’s hair was disheveled, her expression scared.

Mandy blew out, “*Mom*.”

“It was just a bad dream, sweetie. Are you okay?”

Mandy swallowed hard and nodded. Her nightshirt was damp against her skin, blankets twisted around her body. “Yeah, yeah. I’m good.”

“What on earth were you dreaming about?”

“It was about a ghost … He was chasing me.” And this time he’d caught her.

Mom sighed. “Really. Why was he chasing you?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t talk. Creeps me out, Mom.” A shudder ran though her.

Mom ran a hand over her hair. “Okay, well, it’s all over now. You’re safe. Are you sure this doesn’t have to do with all those scary games you play online?”

Mandy *wasn’t* so sure, but she shook her head anyway.

“Well, try to go back to sleep. I think the ghost has bothered you enough for the night. You sure you’re okay?”

Mandy nodded and smiled. “Yeah, thanks.”

Mom kissed her forehead and walked to her room.

Mandy settled back against her pillow, but when she looked at the dark doorway her mom had just walked through, the ghost was standing there.

Fear smacked in Mandy’s chest. She scrambled out from her covers, crawling in to a ball at the headboard.

When she blinked, he was gone.

Trembling, Mandy stood on the bed looking at every darkened corner of the room. Her heart was racing, but she didn’t see him. She quickly turned on the side table light to ensure she was alone.

No little nightmare lurking around.

"What do you want with me, Ghost Boy?" she asked the empty room. "And why won't you leave me alone?"

Mandy tried to fall back asleep, but it wasn't happening. Just after two in the morning, she crept in to her mom's room and crawled in to bed with her. Mandy couldn't remember the last time she spent the night in her parents' room, but cuddling in close, she felt safe … she felt safe for the first time since this whole thing began.

★ ★ ★

Mandy and Lindy spotted each other instantly in the lobby of the hotel. They ran toward each other and hugged, big smiles plastered on their faces.

Mandy pulled back. "This is so cool!"

"*So* cool!" Lindy repeated, pushing her purple glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"And look at us, we're about the same height!"

"Yeah," Lindy said, with a laugh. "You're just as I pictured you, with your leggings and big boots."

"Same here," Mandy told her. "Come on, let's go up to the room and figure out our next move."

They went up the elevator, discussing the latest FNAF fan fiction they'd loved as they headed to Mandy's hotel room.

"I like the ones where the animatronics are the good guys, and they crack jokes. Those are hilarious and entertaining," Lindy told her.

Mandy agreed. "Those are good ones."

"Wow, this is big," Lindy said in awe as she stepped inside the hotel suite.

"Yeah, I know. Nice, right? This is the first time I went with my mom on a business trip. Here, have some fruit. Or do you like licorice?"

"I'll take an apple. Thanks."

The girls sat down at the small table, and Mandy updated Lindy on yesterday's findings about the movie theater, the old eatery, and the missing

boy.

"Wow, you're really good at this kind of thing. I wouldn't have known where to start with these records. You should be a detective or a reporter."

"Thanks. I haven't decided what I want to do yet. What about you?"

"I'm leaning toward marine biology."

"That's cool. You should visit California. We have some awesome beaches."

"I want to so bad. People think I'm weird when I talk about the ocean life. They call me Fish Nerd at school."

"They call me Freak Show at mine."

They laughed together. Mandy found it funny how small and petty the DP drama felt from this distance. There was some hope out here, having met Lindy, that maybe things wouldn't suck forever.

Mandy reached for her licorice as she booted up her laptop. "Anyway, I'm thinking the disappearance of the boy in this story could somehow be connected to *Five Night's at Freddy's* lore."

"Because of the missing kids theme?"

Mandy tugged off a bite of licorice. "I know it's a long shot, but I'm willing to try to find out."

"What's the next step? We heading to Peace Valley to see for ourselves?"

"Yup. It's been a long time, but you never know what might still be there."

Lindy grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that."

A short drive later, Mandy and Lindy cruised through Peace Valley. The sidewalks were small and the businesses a little outdated. Mandy didn't recognize any big chain stores. She noticed a Harold's Hardware store and Sally's Groceries. A post office sat on a corner, and the town's single streetlight was in the middle of the town, by the gas station. The mountains around the town were amazing, and she couldn't seem to get enough of them. The road signs mentioned a river not far off, and she wished selfishly

that she was here purely as a tourist. She would've loved to check it out while she was here.

Lindy pulled in to the small parking lot behind Old Cinemas. The day was warm as they walked around the old building. Stopping in front of the door, Mandy sighed. "Here goes nothing," she said.

Lindy smiled in response, grabbing the door handle.

Together, they walked through the front door of the silent movie theater. For some reason, Mandy felt a little light-headed, and her palms went damp. All this research and she was finally seeing the mysterious building in real life. She didn't know what she would do if all this was for nothing. If the photo in the game files turned out to be a fluke or an error. It couldn't be for nothing. It couldn't be …

"This is pretty amazing," she said.

Lindy nodded. "Yeah, it's the most exciting thing I've done in a while."

"Same here."

They walked in to see a cheap plastic card table set up for ticket sales. The carpet was red with some rips in the flooring. Old posters of black-and-white silent films were pinned to the walls. There was popcorn, candy, and soda cans for sale at another counter.

An older woman with satin flowers in her hair sat at the ticket sales table. "For two?" Her voice sounded raspy. She wore a faded apron with Old Cinemas printed on it.

Mandy and Lindy looked at each other and smiled. "Yes, please," Mandy said.

They exchanged money for tickets for the silent film of the day. As they walked toward the cinema room, Mandy noticed a maintenance man working on some kind of electrical box embedded in the wall.

"Hey, Marge," he called out. "I'm going to have to go buy a fuse."

"What's the matter?" the older woman asked.

"The lights in the theater keep flickering."

"All right, Jim, do whatcha gotta do."

“Dang thing hasn’t been reliable in twenty years. Guess some things never change.”

Mandy put a hand to Lindy’s shoulder to stop her. She turned around and walked back to the maintenance man. “Excuse me, sir? You’ve worked here for twenty years?”

Surprised, the man lifted his bushy eyebrows, as his eyes were drawn to Mandy’s purple hair. “Yeah, got a problem with that? A man’s gotta make a living somehow.”

“Oh, yeah, definitely. I mean, I don’t have a problem with that, sir. Um, yes, you have to make a living. Totally.”

Mandy looked at Lindy and winced, then turned back to the man named Jim. “I was just wondering if you worked here when it was the previous business. When it was called Sideshow’s Snack Shack?”

The man gave a nod. “Oh yeah, that was a fun time back then. Lots of families. Lots of business. Shame it closed its doors.”

“Why do you think it did? Close its doors?”

He scratched his neck. “Well, there was an incident and then, after that, not much business.”

“Do you mean the incident with the missing boy?”

Jim squinted at Mandy. “Why you wanna know, kid?”

“I’m researching this building and read an old article about a missing five-year-old boy.”

Jim tossed his tools in a bag and wiped his hands with a dirty towel. “Yeah, that was the only bad time I recall. After he went missing, families got scared and the business went downhill. Not much you can do to change people’s minds after a tragedy, ya know?”

“Were you there that day? The day he went missing?”

“Oh yeah, I even helped with the police search.” He shrugged his thick shoulders. “But we never found him. Crushed the poor mother’s heart. Crushed a lot of hearts that day.”

“Can I buy you a soda and you can tell us more about it?”

Jim pulled at his ear, thinking. “Research, you said?”

Mandy nodded. “Yes.”

“What for?”

“I’m a blogger.”

Jim nodded. “Ah, one of those diary-type things online? Times sure have changed.”

“Um. Yeah, kinda.”

“I guess. I got a break coming up. I could use an orange soda.”

Mandy bought them all sodas, and they sat at a table by the concession counter.

Jim took a long swig of his soda. “Guess I should tell you about the boy. Always came in with his mom. Nearly every day. They’d order hot dogs and lemonade because that was the kid’s favorite. We had a couple of pinball games back then, and he’d play and play. The mother would say hello to everyone. Real nice family, ya know? We got to know them as regulars. Kid’s name was Stevie. But when it was time to go, he never wanted to leave, and he would hide from his mother. She’d have to go all over the building and look for him. Sometimes he was under a corner table or in the bathroom. One time, he snuck in to the kitchen and hid behind a garbage can.”

“Clever,” Lindy said.

Jim nodded and sipped his soda. “That he was. Feisty is what I call it. Sometimes I’d help the mom out and track him down. ‘Oh, someone might be under the pinball machine.’ Then she’d find him and tickle him. That type of thing.”

“And the day he went missing?” Mandy asked.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Sad. Pretty regular day starting off. They ordered their usual and ate. He played games for a couple of hours. Then his mom called for him. That it was time to go. She started poking around his usual hideouts. Then she came and got me for help. Couldn’t find him, though. Then we started to get real nervous. Looked everywhere. Poor kid was just … gone. Called the police right then.”

“What about the purple man? Did you see him?”

"You mean the stranger?" Jim shook his head. "Nobody I saw that was suspicious. Sure, sometimes we got new people I hadn't met before. Some of the customers started telling the police about a guy they swore they saw, and they all had different descriptions of the guy. I never knew who they were talking about. Nothing came out of it. I think everyone was just scared. We live in a small, quiet town. Everyone feels safe here. Then something like this happens and they wonder if they really are safe."

"But someone had to take Stevie, right?" Mandy asked. "He couldn't just have disappeared."

He sighed. "Yeah, he couldn't have just disappeared."

Mandy and Lindy left without watching the movie because Lindy had to get home.

"That's sad," Lindy said as they walked to her car.

"Yeah, real sad." Mandy's mind was zipping through all the information. "Do you see some of the similarities of this incident to *Five Night's at Freddy's*?"

Lindy shook her head. "Not really."

"We have a missing boy and a purple man. Get it? Like William Afton, the purple guy?"

"I guess so. That's only two small things."

Mandy paused at Lindy's sedan. "But you *do* see it, right? This must be the reason the photo was in the game files, and why it got deleted the next day. The creator of the games was leading us here to solve something. We just need to figure out what so we can set the forums straight."

Lindy stared at Mandy a moment. "Are you okay?"

Mandy gave a nod. "Of course. Why?"

"Just seems this is really important to you. You know, it's a big thing to prove and it's okay if you can't. It wouldn't be the end of the world."

Mandy tugged at a loose strand of her hair. To her it would be the end of the world … the forums, the fan community, they were really the only thing she looked forward to being a part of. She'd found Lindy through those

message boards. If she didn't have them, then Melissa was right—she was just DP's freak show.

"I'm going to prove it." Mandy swallowed hard. She had to. "I mean it would be cool, right, if I connected it to FNAF?

Lindy nodded. "So cool. But just remember, these are real people … not a game. Promise you'll be careful?"

Mandy smiled. "Promise."

M&M SCOOP Entry #220

Guys, I visited the old building that I discovered in the *FNAF3* files. I walked inside and learned of an old unsolved mystery. It was fantastic! I mean, to think I actually visited a place that could be connected somehow to the *FNAF* game lore. I know, you probably want me to spill, already, right? Well, I can't! I'm still piecing together information. This time I want to have solid evidence before sharing everything I've learned. I just want you to know that this investigation is so awesome and surreal!! I love the FNAF universe!! —M&M

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

"You're back again," Jim, the maintenance man at Old Cinemas, said to Mandy as she walked through the hallway. It had taken her a good hour on the bus to get there, but it had been worth it to visit Old Cinemas again. She had one more day in Utah, and she was going to make good use of it, starting by comparing old photos she found on a website to the current layout of the movie theater.

"Yep, trying to see the difference between Sideshow's and how the movie theater is today." She waved her phone in the air.

"You're pretty dedicated, I'll give you that." Jim scratched his head. "Yeah, there are a few rooms we used then that are now closed off."

"Really? Like, which ones?"

“The party room is now the storage room for some of the old stuff—”

Excitement shot through Mandy. “Wow! Can I see it?”

“Well, I don’t know … the owner didn’t know if he wanted to throw it all away, and then he just stored it. But it’s been sitting there ever since.”

“Oh please! This would be so cool for the blog.”

Jim shrugged. “Guess it’ll be okay. But don’t be touching anything. I can’t have you getting hurt because then I’ll get in trouble. Liability and all that.”

Mandy crossed her chunky black boots. “Promise.”

“All right. Oh, hello, Mrs. Robins.” Jim practically bowed his head in greeting. The woman smiled. Her hair was brown with gray streaks, her face slightly lined. She clutched her purse to her side, and there was something about her that seemed … really unhappy. For some reason, Mandy suddenly felt the same feeling in the center of her chest. It was familiar to her. She felt it many times alone at home. A feeling of emptiness and ultimate sadness. A feeling that Mandy sometimes thought would never go away.

“Hello, Jim. Good to see you today,” the woman said.

“You too. Enjoy the show.”

The woman walked in to the cinema room.

“That’s Mrs. Robins,” Jim said when she was out of earshot.

Mandy nodded absently.

“That’s *the mother*.”

Mandy’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Stevie’s mother? For real?”

“*Shhh*. She comes here a couple of times a week, ever since Old Cinemas opened. One of the nicest ladies you’ll ever meet, but you leave her alone, you hear? Poor woman’s been through enough. Come on, I’ll show you the storage room.”

Mandy followed Jim down the hallway, focusing her thoughts on Mrs. Robins. Jim had said Stevie’s mom had brought him to Sideshow’s nearly

every day, and now she visits Old Cinemas in remembrance of her missing son. How sad was that?

Jim halted and fished out the key from his key ring. He unlocked and pushed open the door, then turned on the light. The light only lit the center of the room. Some of the other lights were apparently burned out. The windows were lined with old newspapers, and there were stacks of boxes and old tables and chairs. “Be careful. I’ll just be down the hall.”

“Thank you.” When Jim left, Mandy took out Bobby’s framed photo. She hooked the small photo stand on the zipper of her sweatshirt. “There, so you can have a good view of all this amazing stuff with me.”

Mandy stepped through rows of boxes and packages. A musty smell tingled her nose, and she sneezed. Against the far wall, she discovered a large, old yellow sign. SIDESHOW’S SNACK SHACK was printed in bold letters, and a plain brown bear waved his hand. Mandy snapped a photo of it. There were boxes with party hats and unused balloons with sideshow printed on them. Rolled-up posters were propped in one corner. She found dusty takeout bags with the bear printed on them. A frayed GRAND OPENING banner was dropped in the center of the room.

“The idea that *Five Nights at Freddy’s* could be based on this real-life event, Bobby, is super epic! I mean, I feel really bad for the little boy and Mrs. Robins, though. She had a real sense of sadness to her. Sometimes when I miss you, I feel sad like that.”

Mandy turned in a circle and flinched in surprise.

A shadowed form was lurking in a far, darkened corner. “Sheesh, what is that?” Mandy stepped closer, peering in to the dark. Her pulse sped up because whatever was in the corner made her feel uneasy.

“Um, I know we should see what that is … but something tells me I don’t really want to.”

Mandy picked her way carefully to the corner of the room, and the shape resolved in to that of a bear. Her previous thought came flooding back to her: *All that’s missing is a possessed animatronic.*

She jumped up in excitement, and Bobby's picture fell to the floor. "Oh shoot." She picked Bobby up and hooked the frame stand in to her front pants pocket. "Sorry about that." She walked a little closer and took some photos of the old bear. Dust lined his flat brown fur that seemed to sag on the frame of the body. The bear's ears drooped, and one eye was closed while the other stayed open. The mouth was sewn shut.

"How cool is this?" she murmured.

She peered closer to the bear, and something awful filled her nostrils. A strange feeling of dread washed over her. "*Ooooh*. That's bad. Real bad." A mouse skittered down the bear's face, and Mandy sprang back, waving a hand in front of her nose. "I think this is our cue to go, Bobby. It stinks, and I don't do mice."

She turned away and jolted when the ghost appeared. His skin was grayish now, dark circles cupping his black eyes. His cheekbones were so hollow, the outline of his skull formed sharp edges under his skin. Dark veins lined his face, like he was rotting within. His hair had thinned out, and she could see parts of his skull. Worse, he looked … hungry somehow.

In this dark, cramped, terrifying place, Mandy felt the fear rise sharply within her. She could scream, but the props and boxes would likely dampen any sound. She felt the horror of her dreams could become a frightening reality at any moment. In a long-shot attempt, Mandy immediately closed her eyes, willing the ghost to disappear, but when she opened her eyes, he was still there.

Fear catapulted through her body anew. "No," she breathed.

Mandy took off—around a stack of boxes, hoping to escape. But as she rounded the corner, he reappeared. It was like he was surrounding her. She swallowed hard and whirled back in the direction of the bear. Ghost boy flashed in front of the bear, and this time, he *did* disappear.

Mandy slammed a hand to her beating heart to literally try to hold it in since it felt like it wanted to pound right out of her chest. "I think it's time we get out of here, Bobby, before he comes back."

The ghost flashed again in front of the bear, and then a newspaper clipping floated off a box on to the ground. Mandy crouched and hesitantly picked it up. The clipping was about the missing boy, Stevie Robins, and there was his picture.

Mandy gasped. “You … *are* Stevie Robins.”

She looked up at the bear again, but Stevie was gone.

★ ★ ★

Mandy wasn’t sure how long she sat in that storage room, trying to wrap her head around the fact that the little boy who’d been haunting her was the same missing boy from Sideshow’s Snack Shack.

“Can you believe this, Bobby?” She swallowed hard. “Why would he haunt me? If he wanted someone to solve the mystery of his disappearance, why not haunt a famous detective?”

“Hey, girl, you still in here?”

Seeing Jim in the doorway, Mandy sprang to her feet. “Yeah, still here. Just finishing up. I found some old newspaper clippings.”

“Okay, well, hurry up. My shift is ending soon, and I gotta lock up.”

“Okay, will do! Thanks.”

Mandy turned back to the bear in the corner. Stevie flashed in front of the bear once again. “What are you trying to tell me, Stevie?”

She closed her eyes, trying to backtrack through the dreams. Stevie was always running from her, hiding just like he hid from his mother when it was time to go home. He was always in the *FNAF* games. He was always attacking her. She shivered. And now he kept flashing in front of the bear, luring her …

She opened her eyes to see Stevie appear in front of her. He climbed up the bear, turned its head, and then he disappeared.

Mandy didn’t want to go to the bear since it smelled really, really bad. She stepped closer, the smell getting stronger. Everything inside her told her to step away. To turn around and never come back.

But she had to know what Stevie was trying to tell her. She had to solve the mystery and find the truth.

Hesitantly, she stepped toward the bear, slapping a hand over her nose. Her stomach twisted and did a slow roll. She took a deep breath and held it as she used both hands to reach for the bear's head and twisted …

The head clicked, and a gear sounded, as if some inner device was unlocking. Mandy lifted the head slowly and set it down on a box.

She pulled over a chair and climbed up, peering inside.

It was too dark to see, but Mandy still saw more than she needed to see to put these pieces together.

She clicked on her phone light, searching inside. She saw a little bit of brown hair and a top of a small skull, and a patch of a bright red shirt.

As she pieced together what she saw in her mind, terror gripped her entire body. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing would come out. She jerked backward and fell off the chair, crashing to the floor.

She couldn't scream. She couldn't breathe.

She pushed to her feet and ran.

★ ★ ★

"You did it, girl, you found Stevie," Jim was saying to Mandy outside Old Cinemas, where police scattered around the business. The day had turned overcast, and Mandy started to shiver. "All these years …" He shook his head and waved his arm toward the movie house. "I can't believe I never thought to check inside the bear. He was a hider. I should have checked any possible spot the little guy could get into. After it was all over and the owner decided to close, we just sort of placed everything in the storage room and closed the doors. Never had to go inside. The snack shack was done. How did you find him? What made you check inside ol' Sideshow?"

He looked at Mandy expectantly, as if she could impart some sage wisdom. But Mandy understood beneath his curiosity there was a layer of guilt. For years, he'd been working around the building that the dead little

boy was in, never realizing the boy had been hidden there the entire time, just waiting for someone to find him.

How could she tell him it was really all Stevie's doing? That he'd led her—or scared her, actually—into finding his body inside the old robotic bear. There still had to be DNA testing, but according to the size of the body and the clothes Stevie had been last seen in, the investigator had told her they were pretty confident it was indeed Stevie Robins, who'd been missing for seventeen long years.

Back in the present, Mandy cleared her throat, crossing her arms. "I'm not sure. I was just sort of curious about how the bear worked … and … that's how I found him."

Jim scratched his head. "Well, I got to hand it to you, kid. You did a good thing. Real good. Mrs. Robins and this town are going to have some peace and finally grieve for little Stevie the right way." He looked at Old Cinemas and shook his head as he walked away. "All these years."

"Mandy! I was so worried about you!" Mandy's mom rushed to her.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Mandy murmured against her as they hugged.

Mom pulled back and rubbed her arms. "How did this happen? You found a missing boy?"

Mandy swallowed hard, trying not to cry. "I found him inside the storage room."

"What were you doing looking inside the storage of this old place?"

"It's a long story, Mom. I don't even know where to begin."

"Okay, we'll talk about it later. Is it okay for you to leave?"

Mandy shrugged. "I don't know."

"Did you already give a statement to the police?"

Mandy nodded.

"Okay, let me find out." Mom did her power walk toward a police officer, who directed her to the lead investigator. Mom talked, and the investigator nodded, writing down something in a small notebook. A few minutes later, Mom marched back to Mandy and took her hand. "Let's get to the hotel, and you can tell me all about this over room service."

“What about work, Mom? I know you have a lot of meetings. I didn’t mean to cause any problems for you.”

“Work can be rescheduled. You’re my daughter. *You’re* my priority, sweetheart.”

As they started to leave, Mrs. Robins caught them. She appeared uncertain, and there were tears on her cheeks. Her hands were fisted tightly around her purse strap, as if she might fall away if she let go.

“Hello,” she said hesitantly. “Are you Mandy?”

“Hello, yes, this is Mandy, my daughter,” Mom responded. “Can we help you?”

“I just wanted to say—” Mrs. Robins’s voice cracked. “My boy, Stevie, has been missing a long time. Seventeen years.”

Mom’s face softened. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. It’s been awful, the not knowing. I would think about him every day. Miss him all the time. I would wish he was safe back home with me. I think the day I lost him, I stopped living a bit.” She sniffed. “These have been the loneliest years of my life. And to think, all this time he’s been here. Waiting. Hiding like he used to. I always felt closer to him when I came here each week, and now I know why. Thank you so much for finally bringing my boy home to me. Thank you for bringing me peace.”

Mandy nodded, the knot in her throat growing so that she couldn’t even swallow. She couldn’t respond, so Mom did for her.

“You’re welcome. I’m glad he’s finally home. Take care of yourself.” Her mom guided Mandy to the car. A news reporter attempted to ask some questions, but Mom was a pro and cut them off quickly.

“We’ll call you later if we have a statement. We’re just glad the boy was found. Thank you.”

Mandy and her mom got in the car and drove back to the hotel. That’s when Mandy let the tears flow.

“Sweetie, it’s okay. It’s been an emotional day for you. You did a wonderful thing for that boy’s mother. Remember that, Mandy. You brought that little boy home.”

★ ★ ★

No matter what her mom said to her, Mandy couldn't stop crying. Mom scheduled them an earlier flight home. She heard Mom talking to Dad on the phone—she was worried because Mandy wouldn't stop crying and, well … Mandy *never* cried. Hadn't since she was a toddler.

The flight was quick, and she could feel her mom watching her as Mandy stared out the airplane window, clutching Mr. Happy, tears flowing down her cheeks. It was like every box of emotions Mandy had stored away deep inside herself had burst open all at once, and all her feelings were pouring out of her like an unstoppable waterfall. Mandy felt only a sense of deep sadness that she didn't think would ever end. All the emotions made her feel very, very alone, even though she knew her mom was right next to her. Even though she clutched Mr. Happy to be closer to Bobby, it didn't help.

Nothing will ever help.

When they finally got home, Dad was actually there, dressed in sweats and a shirt. He embraced Mandy in a big, warm hug. Mandy let the floodgates open up wider and cried harder.

"Mandy Bear, it's okay," he said. "Everything is going to be all right. I know it's shocking, what you've been through."

"Maybe we should call the doctor. I've never seen her like this." Mom was coming unraveled. Her voice higher pitched than normal. "It's been hours. She hasn't stopped crying. I don't know what to do."

Mom always knew what to do.

Dad guided Mandy to the couch, and her parents sat on either side of her. Dad handed her a box of tissues, but Mandy couldn't look at them. She felt awful for acting like this. For her parents seeing her like this. She felt awful for all the crying, but she couldn't stop. She felt like a failure, that her parents were finally seeing the real her.

The real Mandy, who was weak and depressing, and a freak.

The charade she'd been holding on to for so long was finally through, and she felt so guilty.

"I'm sorry," she managed to whisper.

"There's nothing to apologize for," Dad assured her, and hugged her again. "You're going to be okay. This will all pass. You're strong, Mandy Bear. You'll see."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not strong."

"Of course you are," Mom said. "You're smart, you're strong-willed, and you're funny. You get the funny from your father, obviously."

Mandy almost smiled at that, but she was so convinced she'd put on this act for so long that she'd disillusioned her parents. "Mom, you don't know."

"What don't we know?"

"I'm weak. I'm a freak." She pulled out a tissue and wiped her nose.

"Mandy Marie, I don't want to hear those words coming out of your mouth."

"Shhh." Dad placed a hand on Mom's. "Sweetie, you're not a freak. You're strong and unique, and we love you for who you are."

Mandy shook her head. "They all think so at school. No one talks to me like a person. They call me names. Say mean things. They put things in my locker. I'm a freak to them."

Mom jerked upright on the couch. "Who are *they*? I'll go right to the school and talk to the dean. We'll fix everything. Is it the Chandler girl bothering you again? She is so spoiled."

"No, Mom. I don't want that." Mandy's voice cracked as she said, "I'm just so sad all the time because … I'm lonely."

She saw her parents meet gazes, and then they reached for each other as they cocooned their daughter in a big, strong embrace.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

Mandy told them everything. She told them all about Melissa and her friends, the bullying at school and how she'd taken it for so long and never

let anyone see how much it hurt her. That she was lonely at school and home and that she wished Bobby was here with them and had grown up with her. Her parents cried then because they wanted Bobby to be with them, too. She told them about her online community and how she immersed herself in the game lore because it allowed her to be a part of something she loved and that she was accepted there.

She kept the part about Stevie's ghost to herself because, well, that might really push her parents over the edge. But she did explain how she pieced the mystery together and ultimately found Stevie. That after solving the mystery, she thought she would feel good, but after discovering Stevie's body, it just made her feel worse. After experiencing Mrs. Robins's sadness, it had broken something open inside her. It was an unloading of epic proportions, something she had never done.

Her parents finally got her to stop crying, or maybe she didn't have any more tears left inside her. Her mom put her to bed, and Mandy fell right in to a dreamless sleep.

Mandy took the rest of the week off from school and so did her parents from work. She couldn't remember the last time they were home together for so many days, just to spend time together as a family, without school or work involved. They wanted Mandy to see a therapist, and she told them she would think about it. After freeing herself of everything she'd been holding in, she felt lighter, and not as lonely as she'd once felt. Maybe that was what brought Stevie to her. He'd been alone for so long and so had she. Now they were both coming out of hiding. She felt as if she escaped something terrible, and she was ready to live her life again.

M&M SCOOP Entry #225

I solved a mystery regarding the building that I discovered in *FNAF3*, everyone. I thought it would make me happy … but it didn't. It actually turned in to an extremely sad adventure, where it started off thrilling and exciting and then finished in a way that was full of sorrow and grief. I've decided to not share

details because some things shouldn’t be shared out of respect for families. I will say, I learned a lot during this investigation and I will probably never know for certain how this mysterious building is connected to the FNAF Universe. It could have been something as simple as inspiration. The only thing I am certain of is, if the creator wanted us to know, I think he would tell us. —M&M

★ ★ ★

“I can’t believe you found Stevie Robins, Mandy!” Lindy said in to the video call. “It’s been all over the local news. You’re like a hero here. My brothers are so jealous that you’re my best friend—they told a bunch of people and now kids at school keep asking me questions about you. It’s been a crazy few days.”

Mandy smiled but shook her head. “It was by total accident that I found him.”

“Did you hear the little guy had somehow broken his neck when sealing himself in to the bear?”

Mandy recalled the dream when her hand slid in to his neck. She shuddered. “Poor Stevie.” Mandy paused, then said, “And just between you and me?”

Lindy nodded. “Yeah?”

“Promise you won’t tell *anyone*?”

“I promise. Cross my heart.” Lindy crossed her heart on the video screen.

“The ghost boy? The one who’d been haunting me? It *was* Stevie Robins. He somehow led me to him inside the bear.”

Lindy’s mouth gaped open. “Oh. My. Gosh.”

“I don’t really understand it, either. But I can’t deny that it all must have happened this way for a reason.”

“Wow.”

"There is something I don't understand, though. Why did Stevie show up in my *FNAF* game dreams? Is it because I found the photo in the game files? I mean, what *is* the connection between FNAF and Stevie Robins's disappearance?" She sighed. "I guess I'll never really know the answer, and that's okay with me."

★ ★ ★

On Monday morning, Mandy walked through the halls of Donavon Prep. Her purple hair had faded to a light lavender and was down past her shoulders. She felt different walking through the school. Her shoulders were not so tight. Her nerves were actually calm. She wasn't bracing herself for a verbal attack because, really, she just didn't care what Melissa and her friends said anymore. It felt like she hadn't been to school in a month instead of a week, and she was really looking at the school with new green and brown eyes. The floors were wooden and glowing with a wax shine. Trophies and old pictures were gleaming from the glass showcase. Girls either didn't notice her, or they weren't giving her a wide berth anymore as she walked by them.

This was her school, too. She'd learned a lot here, and she was going to make a point of enjoying the remaining school year before she graduated, as it was also time to look ahead and plan her future. Mandy realized she had allowed Melissa to steal her school experience away from her. She allowed her to take her happiness when no one should have that power over anyone.

Mandy walked to her locker and spun the combo. She opened the door, and sure enough, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Oh, look who's back? It's Mace Head, the freak show," Melissa said, and giggles followed.

Mandy took a breath and turned to face Melissa Chandler. Melissa's eyes widened. When Mandy leaned in close, Melissa had to tilt her head up and take a step back.

In an incredibly calm voice, Mandy spoke to her. “It’s time for you to listen to me, Melissa. Mandy Mason is the only name you are allowed to call me. My name is not Freak Show. My name is not Mace Head. I don’t care who you are or who your friends are.” Mandy looked at Lily and a couple of other girls, who just stared back in shock.

“You will not talk to me unless I’m facing you and having a conversation. You will stay away from my locker and stop putting little, ignorant pictures or notes or slime in my locker. Because if you do any more of that idiotic stuff, we will have a problem, and I will not back down from you anymore.”

Melissa’s blue eyes were like saucers, her face pale.

“I am done. Do you understand me?”

Melissa made a smarmy face that basically said, “Yeah, right.”

But Mandy did not waver. Melissa and her friends no longer had power over her because she would not give it to them.

“Am I clear?” she asked her, staring at Melissa’s face and realizing all this time she thought she was so perfect and pretty when really she just wore a ton of caked-on makeup. That underneath all the fake stuff, she was just a girl like the rest of the class at Donovan Prep.

“Crystal,” Melissa said, and flipped her hair in an exaggerated turn as she sauntered away, with her gaggle of girls scurrying after her.

Mandy turned back to her locker and saw a larger group of girls watching the encounter.

In a sudden outburst, they started to applaud and whistle. Mandy felt her cheeks heat, and an embarrassing smile curved her mouth.

★ ★ ★

Study period went smoothly. She didn’t care that Melissa and Lily sat by her. Only that they had finally heard her. Finally realized they could no longer bully or hurt her. Mandy did her schoolwork and was happy when the bell rang to go home. She gathered her stuff and went back to her

locker. When she opened her locker, she gasped. Not because there was another note or a slime shooter, but because her longboard had been returned.

“Good to have you back, buddy,” she murmured. She pulled it out with a book she needed for homework and closed the locker.

A girl who had a locker close to Mandy’s was standing by. “Hi,” she said. She had her black hair styled in two braids, and clutched a couple of books against her.

“Oh, hi,” Mandy said.

“I’m Theresa.”

“Mandy.”

She gave a shy smile. “You were awesome this morning standing up to Melissa Chandler. That was really brave.”

Mandy shrugged. “Oh, thanks. I’m just done with them and their drama.”

She nodded in understanding. “I have a longboard, too.”

“Cool. Maybe you can show me sometime.”

Theresa smiled. “I’d like that. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay, bye.” Mandy walked out of DP and rolled home, a smile on her face.

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That night, Mom was home. Mandy’s parents had decided to work out a schedule so that Mandy wasn’t alone so often. She told them they didn’t have to do that, but they said it was time for some family changes. Mom wasn’t going to be traveling as much and Dad would bring some of his work home instead of spending so many late nights in the office.

As Mandy was about to go up the stairs to her room, she heard a light tap at the front door. Frowning, she turned and opened the door.

Mandy’s eyes widened to see Stevie Robins standing before her, whole, healthy, and smiling. His color was good, his brown eyes happy.

She peeked over her shoulder to see if her mom was nearby, but she wasn't. Then she smiled at Stevie. The way he was supposed to look when he was a healthy little boy, who once lived with his mother.

Thank you, Mandy heard the words in her head.

Mandy gave a nod.

Stevie began to walk away. He turned back once more and waved.

Bobby says hello.

Mandy waved back as her heart clenched, watching Stevie disappear in to the dark night.


YOU'RE
THE
BAND

"You can come back now," Dr. Monroe said, standing in the doorway that led from the waiting room to the area where she saw patients.

Sylvia set down the magazine she had been pretending to read. Even though it was one of those trashy celebrity gossip rags where the stories were written on a first-grade level, she couldn't concentrate. Her mind was too busy worrying about what Timmy was saying to Dr. Monroe. Rationally, she knew lots of kids went to see psychologists, and the fact that Timmy was, too, shouldn't make her feel bad about herself as a mother. But parental guilt wasn't rational, and so she couldn't help playing the voice over and over in her head that said, *It's your fault. It's your fault Timmy is in trouble. It's your fault Timmy isn't acting right.*

Timmy had always been such a happy, easygoing child. As a baby, he hardly cried and slept through the night immediately. As a preschooler, all she had to do was set a tub of blocks or some paper and crayons in front of him, and he could amuse himself for hours. Once he started school, his teachers talked about what a nice kid he was, how there were never any behavioral problems with Timmy.

But then there had been the phone call from Ms. Lotts, Timmy's current teacher, saying Timmy didn't seem himself and asking if there might be a problem at home she should be made aware of.

There definitely was a problem, but Sylvia didn't know what it was. That was why she had brought Timmy to see Dr. Monroe.

Sylvia followed the doctor down the hall and in to a child-friendly room with one small table for playing blocks and another for drawing. Shelves around the room were filled with picture books and dolls and stuffed animals. Timmy was sitting at the drawing table, hunched over a piece of paper with great concentration.

"Please sit in one of the big chairs," Dr. Monroe said with a pleasant smile. Like a child psychologist should be, she seemed patient and good-humored, easy to talk to.

Sylvia sat down in a wing-backed armchair across from Dr. Monroe's desk. She looked at Timmy, but he didn't look up from his drawing.

"I often encourage children to draw pictures during a session," Dr. Monroe said. "Sometimes they show things they can't describe in words. And speaking of that—" She leaned down toward Timmy to be closer to his eye level. "Timmy, can I show your mom the drawing you gave me?"

Timmy nodded.

Dr. Monroe grabbed a piece of sketch paper from her desk and held it out to Sylvia. Sylvia looked at her son's artwork, which featured a cartoon bear in a top hat, a blue bunny, and a yellow chick. These characters had been showing up in Timmy's drawings a lot lately.

"Timmy, can you tell your mom about that drawing?"

Timmy sighed like he was annoyed to be interrupted in his work, but he walked up to the picture Sylvia was holding and pointed at the characters. "That's Freddy, Bonnie, and Chica," he said. "They were in the band when I went there."

"When you went where?" Dr. Monroe said gently. "Tell your mom."

Timmy looked up at his mommy with guileless brown eyes. "When I went to Freddy's."

"See, this is the kind of thing he keeps saying," Sylvia said, trying not to let her fear come out in her voice. "But it doesn't make sense. There is no Freddy's."

"Right. There hasn't been for a long time," Dr. Monroe said. "Not since that tragic incident happened—what, thirty years ago? But I remember going there when I was about Timmy's age for birthday parties and that kind of thing." She took the drawing from Sylvia and studied it. "These are definitely the characters who were in the animatronic band, but I was never interested in them when I went there. I was at Freddy's for one purpose, and that purpose was pizza."

Sylvia managed a polite smile. She knew the doctor was trying to put her at ease, but she was too worried about Timmy to joke around. "So do you think you can help him?" she asked.

“May I talk to you in the hall for a second?” Dr. Monroe asked. “Timmy, we’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay,” Timmy said, still absorbed in his drawing.

In the hallway, Dr. Monroe said, “To answer your question, I do think I can help Timmy. But I would be lying if I said I wasn’t confused about the behaviors he’s exhibiting.”

“It’s very confusing,” Sylvia agreed. It felt good to talk to someone who was trying to understand and help. “A lot of the time he seems like a different person. He’ll talk about things he couldn’t possibly have experienced like they’re in the present day. It’s like he’s two different people: the Timmy I’ve always known and then some kid I don’t know. The worst thing is”—Sylvia felt tears coming on but did not want to cry in front of Dr. Monroe—“sometimes I feel like the Timmy I know is disappearing and being replaced by this other kid.”

“I know that must be difficult for you,” Dr. Monroe said. “But the Timmy you know and love is still there. We’ll get this figured out, Ms. Collins. When did Timmy start exhibiting this behavior?”

★ ★ ★

“It’s weird how little boys get obsessed with things,” Sylvia had said one week ago. She was stretched out on the couch, talking to her best friend, Maria, on the phone.

“Tell me about it,” Maria said. “With Miles, it’s dinosaurs. And heaven help me if I mispronounce the mile-long name of a dinosaur in one of his books! Then I am officially the *dumbest mommy ever* in his opinion.”

Sylvia laughed. “Timmy had a dinosaur phase, too. But now he’s all about Freddy Fazbear.”

“The pizza place from back in the day?” Maria said. “How did he even find out about it?”

“The internet, I guess?” Sylvia sighed. “And I’ll tell you, finding Freddy’s-related merchandise nowadays is no picnic. I’ve been trying to

find Freddy party supplies for his birthday, but I haven't had any luck. It's too bad because Freddy is literally all he talks about these days. He watches all these videos about the characters. And then there are all the creepy conspiracy theory videos about the murders that took place at Freddy's back when we were kids."

"I was pretty little when those happened, but I still remember it," Maria said. "Except for school and church, Mama didn't let us out of the house for a month."

"I don't blame her," Sylvia said. "You know, I kind of wish Timmy would lay off the conspiracy videos. It's some pretty dark stuff. But at the same time, I know if I tell him not to watch them, he'll only want to watch them more."

"Yeah, I'd just wait it out if I were you," Maria said. "Soon he'll be bored with Freddy and move on to whatever his next obsession will be."

"Probably so," Sylvia said. "It's weird the phases they go through …"

"And then he'll grow up to be a man and bore women to death talking about football or whatever his big-boy obsession is."

Sylvia laughed.

Once she hung up with Maria, Sylvia continued her internet search for Freddy party paraphernalia. She looked at the Party Depot site and found some generic paper plates and napkins decorated in a balloon-and-confetti design. She bought them on the theory that nobody would be selling used paper plates and napkins from over thirty years ago. And even if they were, who would buy them?

In a sudden burst of inspiration, she logged on to an auction site. She typed in *Freddy Fazbear*. The first item she saw listed was a FREDDY FAZBEAR HALLOWEEN MASK, which had been posted by a seller called R3troM3rch. She clicked on the listing, and a photo appeared. The mask was large, the kind that would fit over a person's entire head. It was brown and fuzzy with round bear ears and Freddy's trademark top hat. She knew Timmy would love it.

Shockingly, no one had bid on the mask yet, even though it had been on sale for five days. Sylvia was about to place a bid when she saw another option on the screen: *BUY IT NOW FOR $100.* It was a splurge, but Timmy's birthday just came once a year, and she knew the mask would make him really happy. She clicked on the link and made the purchase.

That night as she lay in bed, it dawned on Sylvia that she should have looked at R3troM3rch's other items. Maybe they had other Freddy's stuff. She briefly considered picking up her phone to look, but it was already late, and she knew if she spent too much time staring at a screen, she would never get to sleep.

★ ★ ★

Timmy sat at the breakfast table while Sylvia sliced bananas over his bowl of cornflakes. He was wearing a Freddy Fazbear T-shirt Sylvia had found in a thrift store. It was the only shirt he wanted to wear anymore. When Sylvia insisted on washing it, he would go shirtless until it was clean and dry.

"Mom," Timmy said. "Who was your favorite character from Freddy's?" He crunched his cornflakes.

Sylvia listened to Timmy prattle about these characters all the time, but she had a hard time keeping their names straight. Freddy was the only one she could remember clearly, but saying he was her favorite seemed like a cop-out. "I liked the bird," she tried. She was almost certain there was a bird.

"You mean Chica," Timmy said, sounding like a teacher correcting a student.

"Yes," Sylvia said. "I think she's cute—all yellow and fuzzy."

"I like Chica, too, but Freddy's my favorite because he's the star." Timmy shoveled in some more cornflakes.

"Speaking of getting to be a star, I know somebody has a birthday coming up," Sylvia said. "I wonder if you can guess who."

Timmy grinned. "Is it me?"

Sylvia smiled back at him. The kid had such a winning smile. “I think it might be. My favorite seven-year-old is turning in to my favorite eight-year-old. How did that happen?”

“I grew!”

“You did. You’ve grown so much this year, and I’m so proud of you. Hey, did you get the party invitations handed out to all your friends at school?”

“Uh-huh.” Timmy pushed his bowl away. “I told them it was going to be a Freddy party and we’re going to have an awesome time!”

“Awesome,” Sylvia repeated, still feeling a little nervous about pulling off the party. This stuff may have creeped her out, but it made Timmy happy. She smiled down at him. “You’d better hurry so you don’t miss the bus.”

★ ★ ★

Once Timmy was on the bus, Sylvia poured herself a second cup of coffee. She hoped she could deliver on the “awesome time” Timmy had promised his friends.

Sylvia never thought parenting was something she’d have to do by herself. James had been so excited to be a dad, and when he’d found out the baby they were expecting was a boy, he had been over the moon. He’d gone out and bought a soccer ball and a baseball bat right away. Sylvia had laughed and said they were going to have a baby, not a professional athlete. Boy or not, he wasn’t going to be ready to kick around a soccer ball for quite some time. Besides, what if the kid turned out not to be interested in sports?

James said he would love his son no matter what he was like, and Sylvia knew it was true.

But then, just one month before the baby was due, James was involved in a fatal accident at the construction site where he worked. He never got to meet the son he was so excited about having.

Sylvia felt tears welling in her eyes but tried to shake off her sudden fit of melancholy. Really, what she should be focusing on was Timmy's party.

She remembered that last night, she had thought about going back on the auction site to see if R3troM3rch had any other Freddy-related items for sale. She wasn't comfortable with Timmy's Freddy obsession—she felt like if you scratched the surface, there was a ghoulish component to it—but if she indulged him now, surely he would get tired of it sooner or later and move on to the next thing.

She logged on to the site and once again typed in *Freddy Fazbear*. No items came up. She decided to search by the seller's name. Nothing. There was no evidence of that seller ever existing.

It was strange. She hoped she hadn't been scammed. If she had, she would definitely file a complaint with the auction site. At least she hadn't told Timmy he was getting a Freddy mask, so he wouldn't be disappointed when it didn't arrive.

★ ★ ★

But then, just two days before Timmy's birthday party, the mask *did* arrive. Sylvia found a battered cardboard box on the doorstep. She cut the box open, and there, looking a little more weathered than it had in the picture online, was the Freddy Fazbear mask. When she lifted it out of the box, it was surprisingly heavy. It also had a strange smell that Sylvia remembered from her grandmother's closet, when she used to dive behind the musty old coats playing hide-and-seek. Mothballs. She hadn't smelled those in years.

She figured she could freshen up the mask with a damp washcloth and a little mild detergent to get rid of the mothball smell. The mask didn't look new, but it wasn't supposed to. It was vintage, a collectible. Timmy was going to love it.

That evening, over dinner, Sylvia told Timmy, "We need to go over your birthday party plans and make sure there's nothing we're forgetting."

"Okay," Timmy said, forking up some chicken and rice.

“So. I’ve got all the stuff to grill hamburgers and hot dogs outside, and we’ll have lemonade to drink.”

“Uh-huh,” Timmy said.

“And I’ll pick up the cake at the bakery on Saturday morning.”

“And it’ll be a Freddy cake, right?”

“Right. I showed them some pictures, and they said they could do it.”

“Good. Will there be ice cream?” Timmy asked.

“There will be ice cream,” Sylvia said, smiling. “Vanilla and chocolate so people can choose either one.”

“Or both,” Timmy said, smiling back at her.

“Yes, both is always a good choice,” Sylvia said, reaching over to ruffle his hair.

★ ★ ★

“Wow, Sylvia, you really went all out,” Sylvia’s friend Maria said, surveying the backyard’s party decorations. There were balloons and streamers and a traditional donkey piñata. But there were also homemade Freddy-themed decorations, too, even a poster Sylvia had drawn with the cartoon bear, bunny, and chicken that read FREDDY AND FRIENDS SAY, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, TIMMY!” Sylvia had even decorated the back porch to look like a stage from the old Freddy Fazbear’s, complete with a red-star curtain.

“Well, I made it as nice as I could,” Sylvia said. “You only turn eight once, right?”

Miles, Maria’s son, said, “I turn eight in February.”

Sylvia smiled at him. “Yeah, and I bet your mom will put together a great party for you.”

“I’ll do my best,” Maria said, “but this will be a tough act to follow.” She patted Miles’s back and said, “Why don’t you put your present on the table and go play with Timmy and Jamal?”

Miles sped off toward the gift table, leaving the two moms alone.

“So … you think I actually pulled this off?” Sylvia asked, watching Miles join his friends.

“You *more than* pulled it off,” Maria said. “I’m impressed.”

“I don’t know,” Sylvia said, “sometimes I feel like being a single parent I work twice as hard and only do half as good a job.”

“I’m sure you do work twice as hard,” Maria said, giving her a half hug. “But you do a great job. Timmy is lucky to have you.”

Sylvia looked over at Timmy, playing with Miles and Jamal, climbing on the backyard swing set, joking about silly stuff and laughing extra loud. Her heart swelled with love. “We’re lucky to have each other,” she said.

The kids ate hot dogs and hamburgers and cake and ice cream. They took turns walloping the piñata until it spewed candy. Then they gathered around the picnic table to watch Timmy open his presents. “Timmy, before you open the presents from your friends,” Sylvia said, “I have something special I’d like to give you.”

She handed him a large box wrapped with balloon-and-confetti-printed paper. The kids at the table let out an *ooh* of excitement.

“I don’t know what this is,” Timmy said.

Sylvia laughed. “That’s the idea. It’s a surprise.”

Timmy tore in to the wrapping paper, then opened the box. When he saw the mask, he gasped. “Mom, where … where did you get this?” He lifted the mask from the box and held it up so the other kids could see.

“Oh, I just did a little online shopping,” Sylvia said. “Try it on.”

“I love it!” Timmy said, putting it on his head. “Whoa, it’s heavy.” He looked at his friends. “Since I’m Freddy, I’m gonna get on the stage and sing. Who wants to be Bonnie?”

“I can be Bonnie,” Miles said. “That’s the rabbit, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Timmy said. “And we need somebody to be Chica.”

“I’ll be Chica,” Isabella said. She giggled. “But I don’t know who Chica is!”

The three kids stood on the porch “stage” with Timmy in the middle wearing his mask.

“Okay, now we’re going to sing our song,” Timmy said. He launched in to a song that Sylvia figured must’ve been one of the songs the animatronic band used to perform at the old Freddy Fazbear’s Pizza. Timmy must have learned it from those videos he was always watching. Miles and Isabella clearly didn’t know the lyrics, so Timmy asked them to just move their lips while he sang their parts. They seemed happy to oblige.

“Look at you!” Sylvia said. “You’re the band!” She snapped a couple of pictures on her phone.

After Timmy finished singing, he pulled off the mask, “Whew! So cool, but also really heavy,” he said, laughing.

The kids returned to the table, and Timmy opened the presents everyone else had brought. Sylvia was relieved that she didn’t even once have to remind him to say “Thank you.”

As the last kids were leaving, Sylvia felt the satisfaction of a job well done. She shouldn’t have worried so much. It had been a great party.

★ ★ ★

That night, Sylvia was officially ready for some “me” time. Every night after Timmy was tucked in to bed, she gave herself at least an hour to relax and do something she enjoyed. Sometimes it was reading a book; sometimes it was watching a movie that, unlike all the movies she saw with Timmy, was *not* animated. Sometimes it was just taking a long, leisurely bath.

Tonight she had put on her pajamas and curled up in bed with a mystery novel and a slice of leftover birthday cake. It was, she decided, the perfect combination.

After just a few bites and a few pages, Sylvia’s relaxation was interrupted by the sound of a scream. It took her a moment to process what she had just heard. Then there was another scream.

Timmy’s room. The screams were coming from Timmy’s room.

In next to no time, Sylvia was out of bed, on her feet, and running across the hall.

Timmy was sitting up in bed. He was breathing hard, and his eyes were wide with terror.

“Did you see it?” he asked, his voice breathless.

“See what?” Sylvia said, going to his bed to comfort him.

“I don’t know what it was. It was dark and it was moving too fast, but it was right here!” He pointed at the edge of the bed.

Sylvia scooted in to bed next to him. “Are you sure you weren’t dreaming? Sometimes dreams can seem awfully real.”

“But it was right *here*!” Timmy seemed on the verge of tears.

“Well, that’s when dreams seem extra real, sweetie,” Sylvia said. “When you wake up and you’re in the same room where the dream took place. But there’s nothing here that I can see. Do you want me to look under your bed and in your closet?”

Timmy nodded.

Sylvia got up from the bed, then bent down to look underneath it. “Nothing here but dust bunnies. You’re not scared of dust bunnies, are you?”

“No,” Timmy said. He sounded a little less scared. She could hear a smile in his voice.

“All right, now the closet.” She opened the door. The closet was cluttered with board games and shoes and jackets. “Nothing here but your mess,” she said.

“Okay,” Timmy said.

“So the coast is clear,” Sylvia said. “Why don’t I turn the hall light on so it won’t be quite so dark in here and you can go back to sleep?”

“Okay,” Timmy said again, laying his head back down on the pillow.

As Sylvia pulled the door of Timmy’s room half shut the way he liked it, she did feel like she caught a glimpse of something creepy. But at second glance, it was only the Freddy Fazbear mask sitting on the dresser, its unseeing eyes seeming to watch her leave the room.

* * *

The next morning, Timmy was sleeping late, probably because he was tired from the party and the nightmare that had interrupted his rest. She decided to let him sleep in, which gave her a rare chance to relax with a second cup of coffee and the newspaper.

She was pouring her coffee when she heard a rustling sound in the backyard, too loud to be made by a bird or squirrel. She looked out the window and saw nothing out of the ordinary, but the sound continued.

She went in to the living room and looked out the window. Nothing there, either.

Then she went to her bedroom. She didn't see anything, but the rustling sound grew louder. She remembered Timmy insisting that "something" had been moving around in his room last night. Maybe she had been wrong to dismiss him so quickly; maybe there was an intruder who was skulking around in the yard right now.

She should probably call the police. Where was her phone? On the kitchen counter, she remembered as she tried to calm herself down. She had set it there when she had come in to make coffee.

She went to the kitchen and picked up her phone, then looked out the window again. The face of a man appeared, making her jump and knock over the cup of coffee she'd left sitting on the counter.

The man, who was probably in his early twenties, held up his hands and mouthed the word *sorry*. Sylvia put up her index finger in the universal sign for *just a minute* and went to meet him outside.

He didn't *look* like a serial killer, she decided. And surely most serial killers didn't do their work on Sunday mornings in broad daylight.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Sylvia said.

The young man was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and looked like a college kid. "I was just looking for my dog," he said. "He got off his leash."

Sylvia noticed that the young man wasn't holding a leash. "I haven't seen a dog," she said.

“Hey,” the young man said, nodding in the direction of the backyard, “it looks like you’ve been having a party.”

“Yes,” Sylvia said. “My son’s birthday was yesterday. I need to take down the decorations.” She told herself to stop talking. Why was she explaining herself to this stranger?

“The decorations are interesting,” the young man said.

Sylvia nodded. “Yeah, just some stuff my son likes.”

“That bear on the poster—that’s Freddy Fazbear, right?” There was something strange about the way he asked this question; his curiosity seemed more intense than it should be.

Sylvia nodded again, feeling that this conversation was growing increasingly awkward.

“I thought so,” the young man said. “There aren’t too many kids these days who would even know who Freddy Fazbear is.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Kids learn all kinds of things on the internet.” Sylvia felt like this conversation had gone on far too long. He had told her he was looking for his dog, and she had told him she hadn’t seen it. The conversation should have stopped right there. Why had he felt the need to interrogate her about her kid’s birthday party? “Listen, I’ve got to go,” she said. “I hope you find your dog.”

When Sylvia went back inside, Timmy was standing in the kitchen, still dressed in his pajamas. “Mom, can I have some cornflakes?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said, shaking off the strange conversation with the young man. “Did you get back to sleep okay last night?”

“Uh-huh.” Timmy sat at his usual spot at the kitchen table. “Hey, am I still spending the night at Miles’s tonight?”

“That’s right, because tomorrow’s a day off from school,” Sylvia said, pouring him a glass of orange juice. “Lucky you. I still have to go to work.”

“And me and Miles are going to stay up all night long!” Timmy said.

“Is that a fact?”

Lucky Maria, Sylvia thought. She was going to have a wild night with those two.

“I bet you won’t make it all night. You’ll stay up late, but you’ll conk out eventually.” She sliced a banana over his cornflakes. “Did you have fun at your party yesterday?”

“Uh-huh,” Timmy said. “You know, those kids were at a birthday party, too.”

Sylvia looked up from pouring milk on his cereal. “What kids, honey?”

“The kids at Freddy’s.”

She set the bowl in front of him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Is this something from one of those weird videos you watch?”

“They found them lined up against the wall,” Timmy said matter-of-factly, spooning up cornflakes.

“Found what?” Sylvia said, thoroughly confused. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but something about Timmy seemed off. His voice sounded more monotone than usual, and he wasn’t making eye contact with her.

“Found *who*,” Timmy said, like his mom was being obtuse. “The dead kids at Freddy’s. They were lined up against the wall, and they were all wearing party hats.”

A little shiver ran through Sylvia. “Isn’t this kind of a morbid topic to be talking about at breakfast?”

Timmy crunched his cornflakes. “It’s not morbid. It’s true.”

Sylvia poured herself some more coffee and popped a slice of bread in to the toaster. “And you know it’s true because you saw it on the internet?” She didn’t know the details of the murder case, so she didn’t know if what Timmy said about the victims was accurate or not. But she did know that automatically believing something just because you saw it online was dangerous. “Not everything you see on the internet is true, you know.”

Timmy rolled his eyes. “I know that. But I don’t know about the bodies because I saw it on the internet. I know about the bodies because I was there.”

Sylvia was confused. “You were where?”

“At Freddy’s when it happened.” Timmy chugged some orange juice.

“Honey, you couldn’t have been there,” Sylvia said. “You’re seven years old—”

“I turned eight yesterday,” Timmy corrected her.

“Yes, you turned eight yesterday, and those murders happened around thirty years ago.”

“I was there.”

Was it Sylvia’s imagination, or was Timmy talking in a voice that was different—slower and a little lower?

“Timmy, you’re worrying me,” Sylvia said. Her own voice was shaking. “What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense.”

“Don’t worry. It’s okay. Sometimes adults can’t understand,” Timmy said. “Can I be excused from the table now?”

“You may,” Sylvia said, “if you promise to stop messing with me.”

“I’m not messing with you,” Timmy said. “What are you talking about?”

“Like saying what you said about being at Freddy’s the night of the murders. If you were saying that to freak me out, you succeeded.”

“I wasn’t saying it to freak you out. I was saying it because it’s true.”

“Okay, kid, you’re scaring me.” She set down her coffee cup and put her hand on Timmy’s forehead. He felt normal. So much for the theory that he was delirious with fever.

“Don’t be scared,” Timmy said. “You’re nice. There’s no reason to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” There was definitely something wrong with her kid. Sylvia was in danger of crying. “Why don’t you go play in your room while I take care of the breakfast dishes, buddy?” she said, working hard to hold her voice steady.

★ ★ ★

Sylvia was relieved that Timmy was spending the night at Miles’s because it gave her a chance to research his symptoms online and decide what the

best course of action might be. She was sitting on the couch with her laptop open. Quiet nights alone were rare for her, and she generally found them relaxing. But not tonight. She was too worried about Timmy.

Also, for some reason, she couldn't quite convince herself that she was really alone.

There was a slight rattling coming from behind one of the air vents, and when she peeked in to the vent's blackness, she expected to see something staring back at her. But of course there was nothing.

Stop it. You're being irrational, she told herself. *You're not usually jumpy like this.*

She went back to reading and sipping her tea. She knew this situation with Timmy had her on edge. If Timmy's dad were still alive, they could talk the problem over together, but as it was, all the responsibility of making the right decisions for her obviously troubled child fell on her. She hoped the psychologist turned out to be helpful.

She tried to read a child psychology website, but she couldn't concentrate. Then she heard the noise again, this time the rattling accompanied by a scraping sound, but it wasn't coming from the vent; it was coming from above the ceiling. Sylvia remembered that Maria had once had a problem with raccoons in her attic, which had caused a lot of damage. Sylvia went to the garage and grabbed the small stepladder and a flashlight, then went to the upstairs hall. She unfolded the ladder, climbed up it, and pushed open the hatch that led to the attic. She stood on the ladder so that her torso was through the attic's opening and shined a flashlight around the low-ceilinged space over the boxes of Christmas decorations and storage tubs of out-of-season clothes. "Everything seems to be okay," she muttered.

But then something was grabbing her leg.

She gasped. *Don't scream,* she told herself. She couldn't shake off the grip of whatever it was without being in danger of falling off the ladder. She pulled herself down from the attic opening so she could face her attacker.

She looked down to see Timmy.

He looked up at her with his big brown eyes. “What are you doing, Mom?”

Sylvia put her hand to her heart and took a couple of deep breaths. “A better question is what *you’re* doing. You’re supposed to be at Miles’s.”

Timmy shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep. And then Miles fell asleep, so there wasn’t much for me to do and I decided to come home.”

So much for the two of them staying up all night, Sylvia thought.

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I used the back door,” Timmy said. “I was trying to be extra quiet in case you’d gone to bed.”

Sylvia stepped off the ladder. Her breathing was starting to return to normal, at least. “Well, bed’s where you should be going, mister. It’s super late.”

Timmy nodded. “Okay, Mom. Good night.”

“Good night, sweetie. Let me know if you have trouble sleeping.”

“Uh-huh,” Timmy said, walking toward his room.

Usually Timmy would at least put up a small argument about going to bed. It was strange for him to be so docile, but then, Timmy had been acting strange all day. Sylvia felt suddenly very tired and decided to put on her pajamas, but her ringing phone distracted her. She picked it up and saw Maria’s name on the caller ID.

“Hey,” she answered.

“Hey,” Maria said. “I just wanted to check on Timmy. I walked him to your house to make sure he was safe.”

“I appreciate it,” Sylvia said, “but I’m kind of surprised he bailed on Miles early. He was really excited about the sleepover.”

“I was surprised, too,” Maria said. “But to be honest, Syl, I was surprised by a lot of Timmy’s behavior tonight.”

Sylvia felt a growing sense of unease. “Did he misbehave?”

“No, not exactly,” Maria said. Her voice sounded tense. “It was more the kind of things he was saying. Some of it didn’t make any sense. He was talking about the murders at Freddy Fazbear’s like he was there when it

happened, even though it was, like, thirty years ago. He acted weird about other stuff, too … like the video game console and Miles's tablet. It was like they were technology he'd never seen before, even though he and Miles play games together all the time. Timmy just didn't seem like himself, and it upset Miles."

"I'm sorry Miles was upset," Sylvia said. She didn't want to be the mother of the Creepy Kid, nor did she want whatever was going on with Timmy to have a negative effect on her friendship with Maria. "So you asked Timmy to leave?"

"I'm sorry, Syl. I didn't know what else to do," Maria said. "I tried not to make a big deal out of it. I just said that Miles was tired and maybe it would be better if he came back another day, and like I said, I walked him home. I hope you're not mad at me."

"I'm not mad," Sylvia said. It was true. In Maria's position, she would've done the same thing. "Just tired and worried."

"I'm sure you are," Maria said. "So … what do you think is going on with him? Do you think it could be some kind of reaction to what happened to his dad?"

"It could be, I guess," Sylvia said. "But Timmy can't even remember his dad, so why would he be having a traumatic reaction now? If he's still acting strange in a couple of days, I'm going to consult a doctor or a psychologist."

"Of course," Maria said. "Kids are unpredictable. He may start acting totally normal tomorrow. But I'm glad you've got things under control."

Sylvia hung up. The truth was that she felt like nothing was under control.

★ ★ ★

Sylvia pushed the shopping cart down the canned foods aisle of the Shop-A-Lot. Timmy walked alongside her. It seemed like only yesterday that he had been small enough to ride in the shopping cart's baby seat.

“Let me know if you see anything that looks good to you,” Sylvia said. “Especially if it’s something I can pack for your lunch.” Timmy insisted that the school cafeteria’s food was terrible. Based on Sylvia’s limited experience with it on parent visitation days, he was right. As a result, she packed Timmy’s lunch, but she felt like she always gave him the same thing: a ham or turkey sandwich, a sliced apple or orange, baby carrots with ranch dip. He never complained that he was getting tired of eating the same lunch over and over, but she certainly got tired of packing it.

“Ooh, those! I want those!” Timmy said, pointing at a shelf full of canned pasta and chili.

“Which are those?” Sylvia said. Sometimes standing in front of the canned goods had sort of a hypnotic effect on her; the labels started to all look alike.

“Spaghetti Wheels!” Timmy said, still pointing. “The kind with little meatballs.”

Sylvia was confused. “But you always say canned pasta is gross. You just like the pasta I make with butter and cheese.”

“I like Spaghetti Wheels,” Timmy said in the voice that was lower than his usual one.

Sylvia felt like she might be sick. She had always felt like she had a thorough knowledge of Timmy’s personality, his likes and dislikes. But now looking at her son’s face was like looking at the face of a stranger. “Okay,” she said, her voice shaking. “You pick out what you want. I just remembered I need to make a phone call.”

She walked to the end of the aisle where she could still keep an eye on Timmy—or on whoever he was being today—and pulled up the results of her “child psychologists” search on her phone. She dialed the first number that appeared.

“Pediatric Psychologists,” a bored-sounding female voice answered.

“Yes,” Sylvia said, half whispering so Timmy couldn’t hear her. “My son, Timothy Collins, needs to see someone in your practice as soon as possible.”

“Has he threatened to harm himself or anyone else?” the receptionist asked, still sounding bored despite the dramatic nature of her question.

“No, nothing like that,” Sylvia said. She watched as Timmy mechanically pulled can after can of Spaghetti Wheels from the shelf and dropped them in the cart. “He’s just not … himself.”

“Well, ma’am, I can look to see if we have any cancellations and call you back. Is this the best number to reach you?”

“Yes. Yes, thank you.” Sylvia took a deep breath to try to calm down. She joined Timmy at the cart. Why was she so nervous? A person’s child should not make them this nervous.

“Maybe we don’t need to buy every single can of Spaghetti Wheels in the store,” she said, grabbing a can to put it back on the shelf.

“BUT I LIKE SPAGHETTI WHEELS!” Timmy yelled so loud that everyone in the store—and many people outside it—could surely hear him.

Sylvia felt like she was drowning in feelings. She was embarrassed, but she was also confused and scared. Timmy had never been the kind of kid to yell or throw a tantrum in a store, even during the so-called terrible twos. The child standing before her certainly looked like her child, but the resemblance ended there.

She knew she should probably press the issue and make him put some of the cans back, but all she wanted was to get out of the store without any more meltdowns. “Okay, then, I guess we’ll stock up on Spaghetti Wheels,” she said. She wondered if Timmy could hear the fear in her voice. “Anything else we should pick up before we head home?”

“Strawberry ice cream,” Timmy said.

“Really?” Sylvia asked.

Timmy nodded.

Timmy had always hated strawberry ice cream.

★ ★ ★

Too rattled to cook a real dinner, Sylvia dumped a can of Spaghetti Wheels in to a saucepan on the stove. When her phone rang, it startled her so badly that she needed a second to catch her breath before she answered. “Hello?”

“Mrs. Collins, this is Laura at Pediatric Psychologists. I have good news. Right after you and I talked, we had a cancellation. There’s an open appointment at 10:00 a.m. with Dr. Monroe if you’d like to bring in your son.”

“Yes, I would,” Sylvia said, feeling better with knowledge that help was on the way sooner rather than later. “That is good news. The first I’ve heard all day. Thank you.”

After a meal of Spaghetti Wheels and salad (Sylvia passed on the slimy noodles and just ate salad), Sylvia said, “Okay, Timmy, you need to take a bath and put on your pajamas, then you can play or read in your room for half an hour before bed.”

“I hate baths. I want a shower,” Timmy said, once again stating the opposite of his usual opinion.

“A shower’s fine, too. Just get yourself clean and in your jammies,” Sylvia said to the person who was becoming less and less familiar to her.

“Okay, shower it is, then,” Timmy said.

Sylvia cleared the table and started to load the dishwasher. One attraction of serving gross convenience food, she supposed, was that it didn’t generate many dirty dishes. She bent down to put the forks in the dishwasher’s silverware holder. When she stood up, an unfamiliar face was staring at her through the kitchen window.

Sylvia screamed.

With shaking hands, she picked up her phone and dialed 911.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?” the operator answered.

“There’s someone creeping around my house. There was a face looking in my kitchen window.”

“And you are at Nineteen Nineteen Larkspur Lane?” the operator asked.

“Yes.”

“A couple of officers will be there shortly.”

As soon as Sylvia got off the phone, she heard noise coming from upstairs—talking and movement. From Timmy's room.

She broke in to a run, her heart pounding. What if the intruder was already in the house?

Once she was at the door of Timmy's room, she opened it slowly, just a crack. If there was an intruder, she didn't want to startle him with any sudden movements.

In his dark room, Timmy sat on the edge of the bed in his pajamas, talking so softly that she couldn't make out individual words.

But the thing that really frightened her was what Timmy was talking to.

It was a shadow, much larger than any shadow Timmy would cast. It extended from the foot of Timmy's bed all the way up the wall, its shape vaguely humanoid in that it seemed to have a head and shoulders.

The shadow turned to face her, staring at her with beady white eyes, then slinked up the wall and retreated in to the air vent.

Before she could even process what she saw—did she even really see it?—the doorbell rang. The police. She knew she couldn't tell the police about the shadow thing. They would think she was completely crazy.

"Hi, Mom. I didn't know you were there," Timmy said, noticing her for the first time. "Are you going to get the door?"

Speechless, Sylvia nodded.

She hurried down the stairs, not even sure she could find the words to talk to the police. She opened the door to a male and female officer.

"You reported an intruder on your property, ma'am?" the female officer asked. She was a Black woman who looked to be around Sylvia's age. Her badge said *Harris*.

"Yes," Sylvia said. Her voice came out small and meek. "I heard footsteps and rustling outside, and then a man's face was looking in my window. He ran as soon as he saw me."

Officer Harris was taking notes. "Can you describe what the man looked like?"

Sylvia tried to pull some specific images from her memory, but all she could remember was the feeling of being looked at, the basic shape of a human male's face. "I-I'm afraid I can't. It looked like a relatively young Caucasian man, but I can't tell you much more about him. It was already dark outside, and like I said, he disappeared as soon as he saw that I was looking at him."

Officer Harris nodded. "We'll search the area and make sure he's gone." She held out a card. "If you have any more trouble, this is my direct number."

Sylvia took the card. "Thank you."

She closed and locked the door. When she turned around, Timmy was standing on the stairs wearing his pajamas. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Except that it's past your bedtime. You need to go to sleep."

"Okay, Mom." Timmy went back up the stairs.

Sylvia had lied. Everything was not okay. In fact, *nothing* was okay. Her child was having some kind of psychological breakdown. Someone who might intend them harm was skulking around the house. And Sylvia had just seen a supernatural-seeming phenomenon that might or might not have been real. She felt like maybe she was on the verge of a psychological breakdown, too.

She was scared. But she didn't want to let Timmy know she was scared. And she certainly didn't want to let Timmy know that he was one of the things that scared her.

Sylvia wiped away the tear that was crawling down her cheek, picked up the phone, and selected "Mom" from her contact list.

"Hi, honey. How are you?" her mom answered.

"Hi. I'm okay," Sylvia said, hearing herself lie again. She had a strong instinct not to worry her mother.

"No, you're not. I can hear it in your voice. What's going on?"

Sylvia's tears started again. She should have known she couldn't fool her mom. "I'm just … going through a bad time. There was somebody here,

prowling around outside the house and looking in to the windows. I called the police, and they're searching the area."

"No wonder you're upset! And you're there alone with Timmy." The worry was apparent in her mom's voice.

"Yeah," Sylvia said. "I was wondering … would it be okay if we came and stayed with you for a couple of days?"

"Of course. You know you're always welcome. The bed in the guest room is all ready for you, and I'll set up the fold-out bed for Timmy."

Sylvia let herself smile a little. "He loves that fold-out bed for some reason." But then another wave of anxiety hit her. There was no way that Timmy's increasingly bizarre behavior would go unnoticed by her parents. "But listen … there's something you and Dad need to know about Timmy."

"What's that?" The worry was in her mom's voice again.

"He's been acting strangely. He has an appointment in the morning with a psychologist, actually."

"Strange how?"

Sylvia didn't know where to start. "He's not been violent or anything like that. But his thoughts are confused. He's not himself."

"Well, being a kid these days is hard. I'm glad you're getting him some help. We'll talk more when you're here, okay?"

"Okay," Sylvia said, sniffling.

"Come on over as soon as you're ready."

"Thanks, Mom. We'll leave after Timmy's appointment in the morning."

Sylvia walked up the stairs to Timmy's room with a ball of fear in her stomach. She hoped she didn't see the shadow thing again.

★ ★ ★

"Well, he's certainly been through a lot in a short period of time," Dr. Monroe said as she and Sylvia stood in the hallway of her office. "You've *both* been through a lot."

Sylvia nodded. She didn't want to start crying again, but there was a lump in her throat.

"Timmy is dissociating," Dr. Monroe said. "It's a normal defense mechanism of childhood."

"You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say the word *normal*," Sylvia said.

"Well, there are varying degrees of severity when it comes to dissociation," Dr. Monroe said. "But at this point it's too early to judge how severe Timmy's case is. I'd like to see him once a week for the next couple of months, at least. Dissociation is often a response to stress, so if we figure out what's really bothering him, then I can help him work through his problems instead of mentally running away from them."

"Okay, good," Sylvia said. The news wasn't as bad as she had anticipated. Dr. Monroe didn't seem to be at all alarmed by Timmy's strange behavior; she had even used the word *normal*. "Is there anything I can do at home to help him?"

"The main advice I'd give is to talk to him and try to engage him whenever he dissociates," Dr. Monroe said. "Talk to him about experiences you've had together, about things that you know he likes and is interested in. Don't give him the option of mentally going away and 'becoming' some other imaginary kid."

"I can do that," Sylvia said. "He and I are going to go stay with my mom and dad for a couple of nights. With everything that's happened, I just feel the need to get away for a little bit, you know?"

Dr. Monroe nodded. "I think that's an excellent idea. The change of scene will do you both good."

★ ★ ★

It was only a forty-minute drive to Sylvia's mom and dad's house. If she got Timmy up early enough in the morning while they were staying with her parents, she could easily drop him at school before heading in to the office.

Right now, though, she had to admit she was enjoying driving in the opposite direction of her worries. It felt good being out on the open road, listening to music with the windows rolled down, with Timmy napping in his booster seat. Sylvia felt like she was literally leaving her problems behind.

Sylvia had grown up in a modest two-bedroom house out in the country. Her parents owned a couple acres of land and put out a big garden every year. Just seeing the familiarity of the place made her feel calmer than she had felt in days.

Mom greeted them at the door with hugs. “You two get in here,” she said, shooing them in to the house. “Timmy, you’re growing so fast we’re going to have to put a brick on your head!”

Sylvia’s mom made this joke almost every time she saw Timmy, but he was still polite enough to laugh. “Don’t put a brick on my head, Nana!”

“And, Sylvia, you look tired. And *thin*.” Her mom always carried a little extra weight and expressed worry that Sylvia tended to be slightly underweight. “We’ll get you fed and rested up while you’re here. And we’ll make sure Timmy gets plenty of fresh air and sunshine. That’s the best therapy there is!”

“Thanks, Mom.” Sylvia was pretty sure that fresh air and sunshine wasn’t the only kind of therapy Timmy needed, but she was still grateful for her mom’s affectionate welcome.

When they walked in to the living room, Sylvia’s dad said, “Hey, there’s my Tim-bo! Get over here!” He opened his arms for a hug, and Sylvia was relieved to see that Timmy obliged.

Then Dad hugged her, too, and half whispered, “Your mom told me about the creep that was hanging around last night. I worry about you living there in the city all by yourself. You ought to think about having an alarm system put in.”

“I’ll definitely think about it,” Sylvia said. Since her parents had always lived in the country, they tended to think of the small city where Sylvia

lived as full of danger. The thing was, crime and noise had never scared her. It was the unknown that she feared, the threats she couldn't adjust for.

And this week had been full of them.

★ ★ ★

For dinner, Dad had grilled steaks, and Mom had made mashed potatoes and a huge salad. The four of them sat together at the dining room table.

"No salad for me, please," Timmy said.

"But you usually love this salad," Sylvia's mom said. "It's the kind with the mandarin orange slices and dried cranberries."

"I don't like salad!" Timmy yelled.

Sylvia watched her mom and dad exchange an uncomfortable look. "Mom, Dad, maybe it would be a good idea to remind Timmy of some of the fun things he gets to do when he visits here."

"Well, Tim-bo," her dad said, sounding like someone trying a little too hard to be cheerful. "You know how you've always liked helping me out in my workshop. I thought while you're here, we might go out there and work on building a birdhouse. You can take it home with you and hang it on a tree in your yard."

"And then later," Sylvia's mom chimed in, "I thought we might bake and decorate some sugar cookies."

Timmy looked back and forth between his grandparents.

"Does that sound like fun, Timmy?" Sylvia prompted him. "Building a birdhouse with Pop-Pop and then baking cookies with Nana?"

"Uh-huh," Timmy said.

Sylvia felt an overwhelming sense of relief. "Good."

"But right now, Tim-bo," Sylvia's dad said. "You should eat your steak. The protein will make you big and strong." He looked at Timmy's plate. "Oh, I see your nana just gave you a butter knife. That's no good for cutting a real piece of meat. Let me help you." He got up and approached Timmy, holding a sharp steak knife.

Timmy sprang from his seat and tackled his grandpa, knocking him to the floor and wrestling the knife from his hand. “Noooo! Don’t hurt Timmy! Don’t hurt Timmy!”

“What in the world—” Sylvia’s mom cried.

Sylvia pulled Timmy off her dad and peeled Timmy’s fingers off the knife. “Are you okay, Dad?” she asked. Her heart was pounding in her chest.

Sylvia’s dad pulled himself up to a sitting position. “I’m not hurt, just rattled and confused.” He looked at Timmy. “Son, I wasn’t going to hurt anybody with that knife. I was just going to help you cut your steak!”

“I just saw the knife,” Timmy said, “and I had to protect the others.”

“I don’t understand. Who were you trying to protect?” Sylvia’s mom asked with a tremor in her voice.

Timmy looked at his grandmother as though she had just asked a very silly question, but refused to say another word throughout dinner.

★ ★ ★

After Timmy was finally in bed, Sylvia sat in the living room with her parents. She wasn’t surprised that there was tension in the air. She knew they were upset over Timmy’s behavior at dinner. “I’m sorry about … what happened,” she said.

“It’s not your fault,” her mom said, patting Sylvia’s arm. “Whatever the trouble is with Timmy, it’s not your fault. What’s important is that he’s getting the help and support that he needs. We also are concerned that *you’re* getting the help and support you need.”

“What do you mean?” Sylvia asked.

“Your mom and I were talking after you called last night,” Dad said, his brow creased with worry. “And we just want you to know that if you and Tim-bo want to move back in here with us, you’re more than welcome.”

“Even after what happened at dinner?” Sylvia said.

Her dad smiled. “Even after what happened at dinner. He didn’t mean to hurt me. He was just trying to protect himself. I’m just sorry he thought he needed protection from me.”

“Well,” Sylvia said. She hadn’t seen this idea coming. “I mean, thanks for your offer. That’s very generous, but I have a job in the city and Timmy has school.”

Sylvia’s dad smiled at her. “We’ve got an elementary school here, too. You should know—you went to it. And I’m pretty sure I could talk Bill Davis in to giving you a job at the feed store again. He always says you were one of the best workers he’s ever had.”

Sylvia was having a hard time imagining going back to a rural life. “This is really sweet of you, but I mean, this is a two-bedroom house. You don’t want Timmy and me here crowding you out.”

“Well, you living here would just be a temporary arrangement,” Mom said. “I’m sure in time we could find a little house for just you and Timmy.”

“You certainly have put a lot of thought in to this,” Sylvia said.

“Well, we worry about you, living in the city by yourself,” Dad said. “You’ve got robbers or worse trying to break in to your house. Your eight-year-old son is all confused and talking about murders. Maybe it’s time for you to come home, Sylvie.”

“And if you did come home,” Mom added, “we could help a lot with Timmy. I can’t imagine how hard it is to be a single parent, especially to a child who’s …” She paused, seeming to search for the right words. “Having problems.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Sylvia said. “And I’ll definitely think about it.”

“Of course,” Mom said. “It’s not the kind of decision you’d want to rush into.” She stood up. “Well, your dad and I are probably going to turn in. Bedtime comes early here in the country.”

What was now called the guest room had been Sylvia’s room when she was a kid. Being there as an adult always felt strange. Now the room was decorated with a few tasteful floral prints on the wall, but Sylvia could remember when the walls had been papered with posters of her favorite pop

stars, and the bookcase had been full of paperback kids' mysteries she'd bought at the school book fair. It was strange enough being in her old room; it was even stranger to think of moving back here with Timmy. She tried to picture herself working at the feed store where she'd worked when she was in high school and community college. As soon as she graduated, she had moved to the city, gotten a job in a law office, and met Timmy's dad. If she moved back here, it would feel like none of those things had ever happened, like no time had passed at all.

As Sylvia took her pajamas out of her overnight bag, she heard a dog barking outside. Soon it was a chorus of dogs, more dogs than she had even known were in this country neighborhood, woofing and yipping and baying with no signs of stopping. She wondered what the dogs were responding to. Given her recent experiences, she feared an intruder, but here it was more likely to be a possum or a raccoon. She left her pajamas on the bed and went out on the back porch to see what was going on.

Out here, the barking was almost unbearably loud and constant. It didn't sound like any of the dogs were even stopping to take a breath. Her parents' hound dog, Boo, was standing outside the doghouse in his fenced lot, barking nonstop in his deep hound's bellow. Sylvia looked around but could see no cause of the canine chaos. She went back inside.

On her way to the guest room, she decided to look in on Timmy and see if all the noise had woken him. She peeked through the doorway of the little sewing room where her mom always set up his fold-out bed.

The bed was there, but Timmy was gone.

The bed was rumpled, as if he had thrown off the covers. Sylvia's heart was pounding. Maybe he had just gone to the bathroom?

But then she saw the open window. It definitely had been shut when she had tucked him in for the night.

Sylvia ran to the window and looked out it for signs of Timmy. Halfway across the length of the backyard, a large, shadowy figure walked, holding a small boy by the hand. "Timmy!" Sylvia screamed. "Timmy!" But her voice was drowned out by the sound of the barking dogs.

With the strength and agility that only comes during an emergency, Sylvia climbed out the window. She hit the ground running, chasing Timmy and his shadowy captor.

But even though Sylvia was running and Timmy and the Shadow Thing were just walking, she still couldn't catch them. They were always just out of reach, like the pool of clear water imagined by a parched person crawling across the desert. "Timmy!" she yelled again, but her son didn't even turn around.

Suddenly, a pair of hands grabbed Sylvia and pulled her in to the bushes. She screamed, though she knew no one would hear it over the dogs going crazy.

The man standing before her and holding her arms was strangely familiar. Suddenly she recognized him as the man who was in her yard supposedly searching for his lost dog. Looking at him, she realized that the face in her kitchen window the night before was also his. "You!" she said. "You followed us all the way out here?" She was crying and flailing around, trying to break free of his grip. "What do you want from us?"

"I want you to *listen* to me, that's all," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you. Just take some deep breaths and listen." His tone was gentle, but he didn't relinquish his grip of her arms.

"How do I know I can trust you?" she asked. Her breathing was shallow, like a scared rabbit's.

"You don't," he said. "But just … give me a chance. My name is Mike. I'm a security guard at the old Freddy Fazbear's Pizza. The building got broken in to a few weeks ago, and one of the things stolen was the head of an animatronic bear. Your son got a mask like that for his birthday, right?"

Sylvia was a riot of emotions, with fear and confusion topping the list. Still, she managed to nod.

"Listen, I know this sounds crazy, but that mask may have harmed your son. The only way to reverse the damage is for me to take it back."

"Then, please, take it," Sylvia said. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. Was the Freddy mask the cause of Timmy's problems? But how

could it be? It didn’t make sense.

Mike smiled sheepishly. “Well, to tell you the truth, I already took it. After you and Timmy left the house today. It was the only object in your home that I touched, I promise.”

“Okay,” Sylvia said. “So you got the mask back. By breaking and entering. But how do I get my son back? He was led off in to the woods by that thing.”

“I think I know where to find him,” Mike said. “Come with me.”

Sylvia was expecting Mike to lead her to the woods, but instead he led her to his car.

“Hop in,” he said.

Despite the instincts screaming at her from every mystery novel she’d ever read, Sylvia did as she was told. She was very aware that she didn’t really know Mike and didn’t know if she could trust him. But he said he could help her find Timmy, so she was willing to take her chances. What other choice did she have? She couldn’t exactly tell the police that her child had been abducted by some kind of shadow monster.

Mike drove through the city and in to a neighborhood that had seen better days. Old stores sat empty, their windows broken and patched with electrical tape. Mike parked across the street from a dilapidated abandoned building that looked like it had once been a restaurant.

“Is this the place?” Sylvia was growing even more uneasy. Why would Timmy be here? Was Mike tricking her? Had he brought her to this abandoned place because he was really a serial killer?

“Yup. The old Freddy Fazbear’s,” Mike said. “What’s left of it.”

In a twisted way, things were starting to make sense. “This is where the murders happened all those years ago?”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Come on. We’re going inside.” He reached in to the back seat and produced the Freddy Fazbear mask.

When she had bought the mask for Timmy, she thought it was cute and comical. Now when she looked at it, she wondered how she could have ever

held that opinion. The empty eyes, the ghoulish grin. The thing was terrifying.

Mike sprinted across the street toward the crumbling structure, and Sylvia followed.

★ ★ ★

When Mike unlocked the door, it opened with a creak like a horror movie sound effect. He turned on his flashlight and gestured for Sylvia to follow him.

Together they walked through a winding hallway, the pitch blackness of which was interrupted only by the beam from Mike's flashlight. The walls were decorated with fading pictures of Freddy Fazbear and other animal characters. Their smiles seemed strangely malevolent to Sylvia.

At last they came to a large, open room. Mike aimed his flashlight at the back wall, where, set upon a small stage, Timmy stood between an animatronic rabbit and an animatronic chick.

Bonnie and Chica, Sylvia thought. *That's what Timmy had called them.*

The animatronics were moving their mouths to some horrible recorded song that had grown tinny and indistinct with age. But Timmy apparently still recognized it because he was singing his heart out.

"What are we waiting for? Get him down from there!" Sylvia said, running toward the stage.

"No! Don't do it!" Mike yelled.

Before Sylvia could reach the stage, black-and-white-striped tentacles shot from the cracks in the walls and with lightning speed, wrapped around Sylvia's arms, legs, and waist. Another tentacle snaked its way around her neck, stopping just short of strangling her. Sylvia struggled against her restraints, but they only bound her tighter. She was immobilized.

"What the—" Mike yelled, running toward Sylvia. He tugged on the tentacle that had a dangerous hold on Sylvia's neck. It didn't budge.

"Don't worry about me," Sylvia said. "Save Timmy!"

"Not yet," Mike said in a half whisper.

"What do you mean?" Sylvia said.

"Just give it one more minute," Mike muttered.

The awful, broken-sounding recording was reaching some kind of crescendo. Timmy's singing grew louder and louder. Mike leaped on to the stage and put the Freddy Fazbear mask over Timmy's head. As soon as the mask was in place, its eyes lit up with an eerie glow. Mike yanked the mask from Timmy's head, threw it aside, then grabbed Timmy and pulled him off the stage.

A panel opened in the ceiling above them, and down came a doll-like figure with a skinny black-clad body and a clownishly painted face with empty black eye sockets. Its limbs were long and snaky and black-and-white-striped.

Mike looked up at the monstrous figure, his mouth open in an unheard scream. He covered Timmy's body with his own to protect him.

The figure stopped in midair, and as Sylvia, Timmy, and Mike looked on, another figure walked across the room and took his place on the stage between Bonnie and Chica. Freddy Fazbear, wearing the head Mike had returned.

The tinny music started to play again, and the horrible doll-like creature disappeared back in to the hole in the ceiling, taking the tentacles that had bound Sylvia with her.

Sylvia took one of Timmy's hands, and Mike took the other. They ran and didn't look back.

★ ★ ★

Once they were in the car, all panting for breath, Mike asked Sylvia, "Do you want to go home or back to your parents' house?"

"I want to go home," Timmy said from the back seat.

"You heard the kid," Sylvia said. She would text her parents to let them know they were okay. She could figure out how to get her car back

tomorrow. “What … exactly happened back there?”

Mike pulled the car out in to the road. “All I know is that something was alive in that Freddy Fazbear head, and when Timmy put it on, that living thing went inside him.”

“That’s why I felt weird?” Timmy asked.

“Exactly,” Mike said.

Sylvia shook her head. This was all too strange to take in. “But what was the shadow thing?”

“The Shadow knew that the living thing was inside Timmy … I think it was trying to get it out.” Mike briefly took his eyes off the road to look back at Timmy. “You know that all of this has to stay a secret. You can’t tell anybody. You got that, buddy?”

“I got it,” Timmy said.

Mike looked over at Sylvia. “That goes for you, too.”

Sylvia felt an unexpected laugh bubble up. “Who would believe me?”

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

The next morning, Sylvia was so happy to have Timmy home that she got up early to make his favorite chocolate chip pancakes.

She had to call him five times to get him to wake up, and when he finally came down the stairs, his eyelids were droopy and he was yawning.

It filled Sylvia’s heart with joy to have him home and safe. “What would you say to some chocolate chip pancakes?” she said.

Timmy gave a sleepy smile. “I would say that sounds great.”

Sylvia smiled back at him. The voice he had spoken in was definitely his own. “And what would you say if I said that because we had such a rough night, we should stay home from work and school and spend the day together?”

Timmy smiled wider. “I would say that sounds even greater.”

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